

i magazine

a Literary Arts Journal



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i magazine

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THE QUIVERING HAND

Kevin Tourtellotte

I saw the moonlight bend around
The most beautiful creature in the forest.
The curve of her stomach
And the gentle crest of her shoulders.

I put forth a cautious step,
But for fear of spooking her
I stepped back-
A twig snapped.

Her eyes wide,
I could see the glistening blue light
A ghost in her eyes said run
But the demon at her side said stay.

My breath hung heavy
Her neck made it so.
I put forth my quivering hand,
Five arrows,
Struck her soft on her
Moonlit skin... the
Perfect
Skin.

I stepped back two long paces.
The moon faded into a cloud
The light filtered to shadow
She vanished through the trees,
Some where I may never find,
But for this moment I can say
I put forth a quivering hand.

THE MUSIC OUTSIDE MY BEDROOM WINDOW

Kevin Tourtellotte

Drip, Drip, Drip, Drop
Run down through trees
Across the grass
And sail,
Fluidly,
Through hollow space in the humid air.
A bird whispers good morning
Beyond the swaying tree tops,
Calling for mother sun to wake up
And feed the landscape.
The puddles overflow
With the clear-colored drips,
From dissipating cloud tops.
The overture of the rain
Bows out,
As a carefully scrutinized conductor
Steps aside
For the harmony of daylight travelers
And school-morning hikers.

I WILL WAKE UP

Kevin Tourtellotte

I will wake up,
When you wake me up,
Telling me you have a sudden craving
For caramel filled chocolate.
So at 3 am I drive to the only open market,
And buy a heart-shaped box of chocolate,
And a second one,
Just in case.
At 6 months along
You are showing
But remain beautiful, like lily fields in summer.
I cannot stop
This systolic emotion,
And I often crave
The palpitation of our commitment.
It is untamed and sometimes
Suffers fibrillation.
At times we must shock our bonds,
To strengthen the veins between us.
If we were locked
In a four chamber cell,
I would not ask to be with anyone else.
Buying a heart shaped box of chocolate at 3 am
Has never made me happier.

RED LIGHT

Kevin Tourtellotte

Where's the woman
Who likes to sing for the boys

She stands beneath lamp posts
On city streets,
Wishing the rain away.

She likes the work but hates the business.

And sadly,
No one showed her any other way

She showers at midnight
In the gloom,
Under Starlight.
It's the mundane
Inane lifestyle she hates.

But everyone's prejudices
Bounce off her diamond clad skin
Crying out in the night time
Like hyenas upon a fresh kill.

She is manifest hell town
Glowing without arms
To cover her breasts
In the midnight.

NINE YEARS AFTER THE WAR

Andrew Mello

It was 1954, nine years after the world war. It seemed like overnight suburban neighborhoods blinked into existence, providing a necessary shelter for the many drafted in the wars past. Many who went into the war as innocent boys came out as mentally unstable emotionless men. From the outside, each of these symmetrical homes appeared perfect. Crisp green lawns, white picket fences, a multitude of fragrant colors laid out upon flower beds.

Martha Hopkins was a typical suburban house wife, sitting home all day; in a perpetual prison of her own volition. Every day her husband would get up, expecting a full breakfast before he went off to work. When he came home he expected a full dinner and the subsequent sex; then tired he would fall asleep, only to wake up the next morning to do it all again. All throughout, he rarely mentioned a word. This man was not the man Martha used to know, he was an older more scarred shell of the boy she fell in love with long ago. Martha knew nothing more... this routine... it's what her mother did and all her peers were doing. She knew nothing else.

The sizzle of the frying pan, two eggs, bacon, toast, consumption, the door opens and shuts. Her husband was gone for 9 hours. The house was always spotless, there was nothing to do. Martha had adopted cleaning as a natural part of life. She alphabetized books, reorganized the medicine cabinet to the order of things most used, arranged the fake plants in the window so they faced the occasional onlooker outside the proper way. Everything had its place; including her self... this was her life, her perfect niche in the groves and bumps of the world. But underneath this calm existence there was something eating her like a rat clawing its way out of her stomach... she didn't know what it was, but something was there. Like a madness hiding under her sullen tongue.

Once a week she would get together with the other local house wives to play cards and drink while all their husbands were at work and children were at school. Having children was the one thing Martha was most envious of, because raising kids was one game in life she could never participate in. Her husband's seed wasn't fertile enough to grow in the soil of her womb. This thought always stared down at her with a great melancholy. It made the rat in her stomach claw harder the more she thought about it. Much like Martha all these women's homes were like jail cells perfectly arranged and in order. They were all hearing the same monotonous drone humming over Martha's life. These meetings were not fresh, they were just as same as everything else... everything was in a loop like a child's toy train circling around it self.

Sizzle, consume, slam... she was alone again. This specific day was like any other. Then, an unexpected thing happened... there was a tapping at the door... who could it be? All the same boring colors she was used to began to bleed into each other as excitement poured into her body. She dropped what she was doing... she couldn't even remember what she was doing. Slightly winded she stopped, took a deep breath, and flattened out her dress removing any imaginary soot that could have been on it. With a turn of the knob, the door freed itself from its frame. A tall handsome Spanish-looking man wearing a suit and wielding a briefcase appeared with a pearly white smile upon his face.

"Hello maim," said the alluring stranger with a hint of an accent.

"H-h-h-i.." Martha let out sporadically. Her heart was racing; she hadn't felt this alive in a long time.

"I was wondering if you ever though about subscribing to the... bla... bla... bla... bla..."

Martha was barely listening, entranced in this grip of this man's eyes. He was like a vampire and Martha wanted to be his victim... All thoughts of marriage escaped her mind as she asked mindlessly.

"Come in, please come in" with lusting smile upon her face.

She let the stranger in and put the door back in its frame. Her body had never tingled with so much excitement... this was so wrong, but her body was signaling otherwise.

"Nice home you have here..." the strange salesman said trying to break the silence.

"Oh yes, I just cleaned it, I'm glad you like my home..." she was breathing heavy and barely aware of what she was saying.

"Let me guess, you clean because you have nothing better to do... you cook dinner for your husband every night... you don't exist for yourself, you exist for him." Said the stranger with a small grin upon his face.

"Well... ah..." all words escaped her lips. How could a stranger pin point her life so accurately?

"That's how it is for most of the women around here. I wish they knew there was freedom from all that... you can liberate your self, you can be free from this cleaning... this cooking... this... monotony."

His words were like jingling keys to Martha's jail cell. She wanted to know more; she was shivering with potential change, the man stepped closer; her heart was about to jump out of her chest...

The strange man was dressing at the foot of her marriage bed. It felt like all the burdens in the world had been lifted. That rat eating away at her stomach felt like it was dissolving in her digestive fluids. She hadn't felt this alive in her whole life.

"Here," he handed her a form. "Just sign here..." Martha scribbled her name down on the subscription form. The man handed her a book entitled Reader's Digest. "We will be sending you a new book every week. The only way to free your self is to educate yourself..."

Martha looked down at the book and back up at the man. "I think I understand now... will... will I ever see you again?"

"Probably not, I have the whole neighborhood to do."

RADARMAN

Chris Boudreau

Radarman casually turned on the master switch to his main monitor and watched the pixels come to life, dancing on a placid screen. As they flickered, he sat uncomfortably on the cheap folding chair and let himself be taken by the mighty screen. Powerful and alien, the circular screen must have been three feet across. The Radarman couldn't imagine any human designing this thing. It was edgeless and impossibly thin, truly an imposing monolith to behold. Soon after the main screen had fully powered, the six sub screens which hung above the main in a hemispheric pattern hummed gently then blinked on in perfect synchronicity. The small hydraulic necks behind the screens pumped and tilted the screens inward so he would be completely surrounded. There he sat, bathed in the all powerful light of the surreal digital world, unwilling yet ready to take on his solemn responsibility as he had done for years beyond remembrance.

There was a reason why he had been assigned to this position although he no longer remembered it. Habit and repetition had made this less than a job. It was more like breathing or eating for him, something that made him who he was. To observe and never be observed, being the silent watcher. The Radarman waited nearly a whole minute before the system chose a subject. He anxiously tapped his feet wondering who he would observe today. Would it be Michael, whose love for beating his dogs was only outweighed by his incompetence and corruption as a cop. Or possibly Steve, the reclusive, paranoid coke fiend who periodically sapped taxpayers' dollars with unemployment. Or if his luck held out, he would watch Carrie swing around a steel pole in a low lit night club, entertaining the crowd. They were all characters to him. His characters that he watched progress through their lives, unaware of his omniscient presence. The system finally halted and registered the subject's name in large green print. Catherin Shobert. A personal favorite of his. Unfaithful to her husband and abusive to her children, she was entertaining to say the least. The main screen slowly filled with

color and definition until it showed completely the interior of her kitchen. He let himself become totally immersed.

Jake Shobert sat at the table in his knock off Armani suit reading the business section of the local paper, slowly sipping his coffee, while Catherin threw together PB and J sandwiches in the most uncaring way, for Tom and Kate. "Let's go, we're gonna be late!" she yelled up the stairs to rouse the attention of her children. They came running down in file, playing an impromptu game of tag and screaming most happily. This did nothing but anger their mother. "Tomas, if you don't stop screwing around, you'll make me late for work." She grabbed him by the ear and directed him towards the door, a painful whine following every footstep. "See you at six then?" asked Jake, to whom the only reply was a slammed door and a calm silence. Catherin forced her children into the car, which Jake had paid for, and swiftly shut the doors, not thinking to ask them to buckle their seatbelts. As she walked around to the driver side, she spotted Fred, the sixty-five year old neighbor pruning his hedges who she gave no acknowledgement of besides a coy smile. Fred slowly waved and went back to his bushes. He was a sad story, and the Radarman was glad he didn't have to watch him today. Catherin started the car and lit a cigarette at the same time. She speedily pulled out of the driveway and turned on the radio to drown out her children as she had done so many mornings. As usual, she slipped into a daydream halfway to the school. The Radarman could "see" these daydreams in a way. It was hard to explain or even comprehend for himself. It was as if her thoughts were his and he just instinctually knew what she would think. She thought about herself as a schoolgirl, as she often did, playing in the yard with her friends. She was so much happier a person then and had never really grown into her own skin. She pictured herself as she was now, graying hair and crow's feet, running down the halls in chase of her friend who would taunt her and tell her to give chase. She could never make it all the way down the hall in these dreams though. She would fall in the hallway, so desperately wanting to get to the yard where her friends were. Beckoned by the ethereal light of the door that led outside, she would simply collapse halfway and become stiff. Then her limbs would become as light as ash, drifting down the corridor. She snapped back into reality from the lucid, recurring daydream and found herself parked outside of the school with her

children leaving the car without a command from their mother. She mumbled something close to goodbye, but the children didn't hear it and she didn't care anyway. Pulling out and signaling to traffic, she drove off to work, wishing she was a happier person.

The Radarman shifted the weight of his unshaven chin to his left hand and slowly turned the largest knob of the control panel sitting beside the main screen a quarter inch. The screen faded out and went to a serene black. This was all just routine for him. He had been witness to Catherin's daydreams many times before. Lazily, he had watched her slip into madness and despair over the course of two years. And it was all just work for him. He had been eating a Twinkie when she cut her wrists in the bathroom, and swabbing his ears as she plotted to murder her husband. He felt no emotion towards the subjects and their lives. If he did, he would have gone insane by now. These screens in the basement of 26 Mercer dr. had become a part of his daily life, albeit a strange part.

The Radarman reached for his logbook and pen, his arm spanning over a sea of discarded cans and cellophane wrappers. Placing the logbook in his lap, with his pen delicately poised between his finger and thumb, he wrote the date and time the daydream took place. August 15, 7:00 am. This entry was at the bottom of a column of entries stretching thirty entries upwards and at least twenty pages back. The notebook cracked with the noise of used paper and displayed quite clearly its contents with a simple title, "Catherin's Daydreams". The Radarman threw the notebook carelessly into a mound of similar notebooks nearly two feet high. He looked at the disorganized pile with resentment, fully aware that he did not possess the filing skills necessary to put these innumerable notebooks in some kind of logical order. He slouched back on his chair and rubbed his eyes vigorously. He wished he could be free from this torture. He despised observing people's lives every day of his. It was painful and embarrassing. He suddenly became hungry and realized he hadn't eaten breakfast. He rose from his cheap folding chair and went to the door. As he was turning the knob to leave, he wondered what other jobs he could have fallen into. At times he dreamed of being a car salesman.

THE OOMPA LOOMPA'S LAMENT

Christina Hyvarinen

That Willy Wonka stole my spotlight!
I don't know what they were thinking
When they chose that tall, stalky nobody to be the star.
He was a simple extra
that twisted the entire story!
The story was *supposed* to be about me,
the famous oompa loompa!
It *was* a fabulous musical until that wretched man took over.
How wonderful of the director to spare me a few quick songs,
which are the *sole reason* the story even became so popular.

Unbelievable!
What would possess him to act as if he had a limp leg and then
emphatically
reveal his lie with some lame gymnastics?
What an awful grand entrance!
Immediately, the entire audience is introduced to a fraud!
And he continued with this fraudulent façade
throughout the rest of the story.

I was the man behind the success of the chocolate factory.
All day long I would test the chocolate, assuring it was at the
appropriate temperature,
oil all of the machines, so they would function properly,
and make sure that all of the *other*
oompa loompas had not fallen asleep at their stations.
At night, instead of sleeping,
I spent my time concocting new recipes that would soon become
famous
And that Mr. Willy Wonka would take all the credit!

And who do you think saved those poor,

Unfortunate children from such tragic events?
Yet again... it was *me*.
That awful Willy Wonka tricked the audience
into perceiving those children as terribly spoiled nits, but they
weren't at all!
They were lovely young ladies and gentlemen who had been
duped!
Mr. Willy Wonka purposely chose those particular children
and placed them within temptation they were unable to resist.
That selfish man didn't *really* want to leave the chocolate factory
to *anyone*,
so he tried to get rid of them one by one,
but *I* saved them all.

The only boy he could not do away with was Charlie,
and at the end of his tour of the factory,
he was forced to keep his word,
and give Charlie *everything*.
I *would* have been surprised by his generosity and change of heart
had I *not* known that the evil Slugworth was patiently waiting
around the corner
ready to kidnap an unsuspecting Charlie,
as soon as he walked by.

BICENTENNIAL SMASH

Colin Progen

Autumn was descending upon October.

Earth tones.

The maroons and mustards, burnt umbers and sienna fell downward in a sheet of crisp parmesan. Each dried, curled cup tenderly plunged to the dirt beneath his feet.

They crunched under foot; a mouthful of raw elbow noodles.

Each footstep was a mouthful of aluminum foil. As he proceeded forward, he left the life of last week behind him. October 1st signified a new life, one of the many.

October 1st fell on a Sunday that year.

Perfect. A Perfect Sunday in a Perfect month.

A new life, another year.

Last week was now an old life of his past.

October's stomach was feeling nervous again. He pressed his shaking hand to his abdomen.

With each drag on gritty air it teleported him into every room of the old house that was haunted by memories of why the smell still coated him.

With each deep inhale he was lured into a labyrinth of rapture. Shadows lurking behind each corner suggest a new beginning, a sanitized second chance.

One footstep at a time, one foot in front of the other, October walked along the rail road that was implanted into the ground, the dirt and the cement road.

It owned the town, running along the outskirts and the bordering towns,

then jetting directly through the heart of its "downtown" area.

The town was a long stretch of country folk with a twisted road painted with a crisp yellow line which intersected with the rusted tracks.

The train would pass trees,

houses, woods, the vinyl sided pizza house,
an inn on stone foundation,
the brick police station (where he had yet to ever see a police
automobile parked in the vacant lot)
and the two story theater.

Corn stalks stood tall in every other door way with plump
pumpkins at their thickset bases.

Wreaths tied with raffia from which wooden turkey decorations
hung were in every other window.

The pumpkins were his favorite part of autumn.

He would smile back to the jack-o-lanterns until they laughed and
tipped their pumpkin stemmed hats
towards him.

He'd try to read what their triangular eyes told him; October's
secrets,
as he called them.

Whether he was referring to his own secrets or the secrets of the
tenth month of the year was beyond knowledge.

Inside the bag strapped to his back, there was a
leather covered book.

Under the current date he had written...

“A reddish brown fox passed my way this
morning when I arrived.

The one with the bushy white tail.

It wished me luck before it trotted across
the road into the trees with hawk and quail.

The second one welcomed me when I got
into town,

then followed a rusty, tattered train.

Then I came across a hedgehog,
who leaned over the remnants of a close

friend.

He mourned and wished he could create
the fountain of life with his tears.

I tried to be discreet, but I startled him
away.”

He walked on.

October, such a charmer
and everyone knew.

Rarely did October walk through populated areas, but at times it was inevitable. He made connections, not friends. To the naked eye, October was ordinary, but he was noticed.

His eyes seemed to dimly glow an orange tint the entire month though. His pupils breathed a chilly flamed breath with each gaze.

There seemed to always be an unreadable smirk pulled across his lips.

Perhaps feeling the glow of the sleepless night before, or maybe it was the smirk of escaping consequences.

It could have been the fact his blood ran thick with ancestry from when accusing shouts ricocheted off wooden trial houses in Salem.

Perhaps it was the nervous smirk after the gutting of a chicken or the expression after a first orgasm. Deceivingly satisfied, wandering alongside the ancient iron tracks, October watched the brittle leaves stir around the wheels of pick-up after empty pick-up, like a cauldron of stew.

People noticed the boots he wore and the tight jeans. They often stared.

Was it the tight, low cut jeans that hugged his hips and ass or was it the shirt with the open collar.

Maybe they wondered what was in his bag, or why the fuck he was smiling.

Either way, he was noticed and forgotten about, just how he liked. The wind whirled through a dozen pairs of trees. The half clothed wooden branches pointed crooked fingers towards the scenery behind the cascading sun who winked a goodbye and goodnight to the tiny town.

The stick figures in their cubed sanctuaries stood in their nightclothes and returned the gratuitous wink.

October blew a kiss up to the purple that began to empty across the sky like spilt milk.

The evening breeze goosed the wrinkled leaves still on the branches repeatedly leaving them flapping, clattering and ramming against one another up and down in the air.

They gestured his arrival. Stillness breezed the leaves as the tranquility passed through.

October felt the sting riding the air blow into his eyes, across his smooth cheeks and into his mouth.

He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

The taste of the sting danced under his tongue, and slipped in between his teeth like weaving wicker.

Painful. He could feel every space...
between each tooth.

He resisted the urge to bite his inner cheeks.

He brutally swat at the air with his lengthy, out stretched arms as if a cloud of gnats swarmed him.

He shielded his face with an entire arm and squinted as if a burning sun was in a mid afternoon sky.

But it was not summer.

In the violet light of the evening, the grass where he stood shimmered in the corner of his eye.

Tiny little domes lined the ground,
that from a birds eye view looked like miniature armed forces.
Round, short, stout soldiers with big rounded sun bonnets that fit
the tops of their heads tightly.

They bounced and sung a cappella as his jury of witnesses.

The mushrooms he stared at on the ground jumped in the dry dirt
and swayed to the electric organ slamming with a bluesy reggae.
Their little slits for mouths and x's for eyes all widened for their
finale of synchronized fugue.

October had his grin on his face again. Had it ever washed away?
He crouched down, bent at the knees and reached out for one of
the silvery mushrooms.

It screamed for it knew it was the chosen one. It knew its end was
near. It could see the light.

The tiny high pitched scream stopped October's large hand in mid
air.

Thus, the mushroom stopped screaming, a bead of sweat dripped
from its wide brim hat.

October stopped smiling, but continued to reach.

Appalled, the mushroom shook and the others parted; half leaned
to the left, the other half to the right.

They left the tiny shroom in the middle... horrified and
trembling... it closed its petite x's for eyes into slits.

It opened its mouth into a circle

for one last blood curdling scream
that would never even reach the road.
It opened its mouth and it took a deep breath just as October's
five fingers
-with neatly trimmed nails-
gently touched its fedora, and sympathetically plucked it from the
earth.

"I thought you weren't gonna eat that shit
anymore?"

October spun around and clenched the cap and stem in his hand.
He thought he felt it wiggle, but didn't loosen his grip. Ramsey
was standing aback with an eyebrow raised at his friend.

"It's natural... and I'm hungry. Where the hell have you been?"

"Around." Ramsey snapped back. The eyebrow was
back in place but now the eyes were looking into the distance.
"I had some work to do. Why? Did you miss me?"

"Oh of course my love... as always." October rolled *his* eyes now
and continued.

"You just get me all worried and when you run off all the time.
You know my nerves and stomach."

"Well, I'm no baby sitter dude. I can't hold your
hand all the time. And once again, maybe if you didn't eat that
shit your oh-so-delicate stomach wouldn't be so angry all the
time, but no, don't let me be the one to stop you from your
precious din-din."

"Well then," October thought to himself.

"Cheers mate." He raised the rubbery textured
mushroom to Ramsey's eye level and popped it into his mouth.
Chew... Chew... Chew.... Mush.

Let it lay under his tongue.

Chew. Mush. Swish. Wait. Swallow.

October's tongue did its job of running across the curves of his
teeth to evict any leftover bits.

Already he was feeling less nervous and his stomach settled.

"Shall we walk?"

October and Ramsey interlocked arms and continued through the
grass as the breeze moved them along.

Autumn had descended upon October.

The leaves whispered their names assumingly and carelessly flapped a gesture to invite them into the haunting woods.
They followed.

The wolves hunted for adventure, and they followed.
They followed one into the nude waters of a pollinated pond southward down a hill.

The middle, the deepest, and the coolest is where the heart of his passage hides.

A train without a caboose chugged through the trees along a slick lake.

The conductor grabbed a hold of the railing as he leaned out of the opened door and called its final boarding call. The lake began to crawl. It slowly crept, consuming twigs, fallen leaves, dirt, patches of green grass and that fox. October couldn't tell if it was the first one he had seen

or the second. They looked so similar in his memory.

The newly formed river rushed toward October.

Waves formed hands with long fingers,
long like bamboo stilts reaching for his throat.

Chickadees buzzed about with the humming birds above the insufferable watery rage.

One last dark shaggy tail swooshed into a passenger cart along side the middle of the intended train, embarking on this antagonizing journey.

Each furry face in the window yelped a howl into the screaming silence.

The snarls and shouts tripped over each other viciously, as if their multi-personalities could shatter at any moment.

October waited for a cleared storage car to pass him. Each one was full.

“Tickets! Tickets! Get out your tickets and boarding passes!” he heard yap in the far distance as the front of the train turned a corner

and the rest of the stretch followed passing through the same air, over the same tracks as the engine did seconds prior.

The whimper of scared farewells echoed to prey as October got a running start to jump into the moving train car. With springs in his feet, he denied gravity and in slow motion arched himself in a catapult through the open door. October landed kneeling with one knee and one foot planted to the floor boards.

With that foot, he pushed and straightened his bent knees to propel himself into a tumble over his right shoulder. He landed among silent stacks of hay.

He had just joined the barking tribes to scour the wooden rural.
He looked around the boxed car of the train.

The walls were a light canvas, almost damp.

Ink ran through the engine and acrylic kept the gears from sticking.

The cool breeze made October cross his arms and fold his knees up to his chest.

He removed straw from the neck of his shirt. If only there was a side door to slide shut the breeze out.

He looked up. The roof above his head was a flush of watercolors. The swirling colors molded into a pastel Easter mess.

October stuck out his fingers and raised his arm above his head.

Slowly, he stood up, not taking his eyes off of the watery paint.

His finger tips just reached the roof more than six feet over the pile of hay from where he sat.

He dipped each finger up to the knuckle in the color.

He stood on his tip toes to gain that extra inch and from the weight of his body on his ten toes,

he was gulped into the floor up to his ankles.

Creamy, greasy, bold and strong the floor boards were a shallow pool of oil paints.

With a slip of the foot, his left leg kicked out in front of his body. His arms sprung outward to his left and right to keep balance, he grabbed at the wall that crumbled like colored wax and his body flung backwards; his feet airborne, arms grasping for Ramsey's invisible hands.

His body fell horizontally backwards, his eyes gazing up into the pinks, blues, yellows and purples that started to regurgitate down upon his face.

As he fell, October felt the back of his head hit something softly weak.

His head seemed to slip into a hat, but the hat was nothing but rope.

The back of his head slipped into a noose that stretched up into the middle of the whirlpool of Easter vomit.

The rope hung from the blackened center.

The waves oils parted down the middle of the train car floor and the wooden floor boards were gone.

Colored rain splattered the railroad tracks as the train sped full speed off the edge of a cliff.

As October fell hard, the noose tightened, his vision went black, there was a sound of a twig snapping under foot. The rope frayed and disconnected from the storm above the floorless train car that soared over the earth below. October's throat and stomach shifted in his body as he fell downward.

The world still black to him he fell like Alice down the rabbit hole. He fell as if thrown from a plane with no parachute.

With a jolting spasm his eyes opened and the blurred vision of Ramsey was looming overhead.

Ramsey blinked, and then slapped his friend's face.

“You were out.”

October reached for his neck. Smooth skin, no breaks, no blood, no exposed bone.

“Are we still moving?”

“We are. Have yet to stop. Looks like someone had a party,” Ramsey said sarcastically and raised his hand to a streamer of toilet paper that dangled inches in front of his face. White toilet paper streamers actually hung all over from the ceiling like snakes being tied by their back ends and strung up to be put on display.

They twirled and hissed with the wind whipping outside the speeding train.

“How fitting, a bicentennial smash. An admiration of tribute.”

Ramsey winked at his friend.

October closed his eyes and curled his lips back into that erratic smirk.

PURPLE VELVETEEN PANTS

Colin Progen

There were crows feet in the corners of his pale eyelids, clenched so tight they looked like they may not ever open again. His lips were slight and pulled straight across his narrow jaw line. There was a hideous red mark on the left side of his neck, border lining infection. Long arms hung lifeless at his sides like an orangutan, squeezing an oversized key, at least a foot long, in his large, tight hand. The voice in his head, which was his, was almost as dark as his skin; Smokey, raspy, monotone but great dictation. When he smiled he showed rows of sugar cubes, but there was no emotion on his face now.

Everything about him just hung as he sat on a small wooden stool, at the end of an alley way, running between two brick buildings. The alley ended where the two buildings conjoined... another brick wall. This brick wall that abruptly put an end to the outside hallway was what the small wooden stool faced. Kokoa just sat, staring through his translucent eyelids. His lanky arms and legs dangled like slaughtered meat hung by rusty hooks from the ceilings of underground meat cellars. The muscles in the hand holding the key and his tense eyelids were the only currently active muscles in his skinny body. Sitting on the small stool, his bony knees were level with his flat chest encased in a gray sweatshirt with a few stains that showed he was a hard worker, not that he was dirty, because even though his hands were coated in grease, dirt, paint, soot and other black matter, it didn't mean he was dirty, just smart with his hands. His elbows came to points, his shoulders jettet straight out for miles then slipped down the slick slides of his arms, over the rippling muscles in his unflexed biceps. Kokoa's ears were even long with unattached lobes. They may have looked better connected. After the hot, steamy morning, rainy afternoon and extremely muggy night his Afro was rugged, dense, and close to his head.

His lanky legs itched to stand but he sat still as his skin smoothly crept up to his torso. Kokoa slowly opened his eyes and found himself staring at the brick wall, which was in fact covered with graffiti. He had no memory of how long he'd been sitting, facing this colorful wall, he was simply glad not to be locked in his own thoughts anymore. The piece of artful graffiti that stood out the most was a grey and silver highlighted padlock, oversized with a keyhole nearly a foot long. Still Kokoa couldn't even guess how or why he was in the alley at this given moment. He figured he had nothing to lose. He centered and pulled energy into his legs and stood up quickly and swiftly without a sound or unnecessary movement. His arm was in the air and key inserted in the slit between bricks before he could think it over. It fit perfectly into the padlock's notch. The bricks shifted some and the wall swung out towards Kokoa. He grabbed it, looked over his shoulder and slipped it, not quite closing it all the way behind him. Behind him now, a crack as tall as he of sun light from the outside world; in front of him was a foggy spiral staircase that he couldn't see the top of. The black steel just went up into a light cloud of mist. His hand reached to grasp the railing but hesitated. Instead of clutching, he quickly slapped it to make sure he wasn't imagining spiral staircases that lead to fashionable absent silent pauses.

He bent his knee, raised his foot and stomped his way up the cold, clanky stairwell. Worn of the steep climb, he rose forth on the giant, murky stairs until he reached the top. Not as far as he thought but his legs burned. There was a platform with a vat of smooth white chocolate. He dipped his face in and withdrew a shimmering saber between his teeth. He dropped it to the metal scaffolding releasing soul with a scarf of scarlet warmth. The scarf dripped off the ridge, over the ledge, where loose screws drop down laundry shafts of abuse into white sheets of cotton. Looking over the ledge, thinking about the slip, watching the ruby scarf delicately glide downward until it was out of sight, he took the divine dive. Vision went black again and he awoke in a waiting room of brick walls, with the staircase in the center of twenty golden, wooden, pleathered, cushioned chairs. Under chair number seven, a sickening vivid floor chilled beneath a creature. Straight jacket, purple velveteen pants and crocs; his head teetered back and forth fighting drowse. Dreamers lack aptitude to lounge in longevity of stupor solstice. Kokoa moved

quietly through the almost empty room, careful not to disturb the zoning creature. He reached a door not as big as the first and entered the next room. He reached into his pocket and felt around. The bar wasn't packed but there weren't many seats left at the counter. Some people danced, others sat at small circular tables too close for comfort, but most sat at the bar with drink in hand.

"Got it." He thought and pulled out a green lighter and lit the cigarette that was stuck to his bottom lip. He ignored the people who stared at him. "What the hell is happening to yourself?" Still, no clue, only the sound of a close by passing train. He still wasn't sure if it was a dream or not. He looked around the room with disgust.

"I never sat at those tables on dates... hell, I guess I never had any dates when I was that young... but I guess if I had gone out more, I wouldn't have wanted to come here... to smell my date's alcoholic breath..... where's the bartender?"

He blew smoke rings out of the curl of his lips, but only in his mind. Instead, the smoke came bouncing out into clouds that loomed above the bar. It must have looked like Kokoa was blowing kisses towards the back door that Armand came out of because he said,

"If you don't cut that out, I'm cutting you off, sweet pea." As he slammed a napkin onto the counter, "wipe up your ashes."

"Smoke rings." he almost yelled out, but caught the words, and changed them to a slight whisper.

"Excuse me?" Armand now looked up from the soda hose he had shoved into a 16 ounce glass, half full of vodka already. He filled it to the rim and stopped before it trickled over. He sighed and acted as if he wasn't impressed.

"Sorry..." Kokoa continued, "I've never been able to make smoke rings."

"Well I ain't never seen a shooting star 'til last week.... The fucker almost landed in my back yard – so maybe you should quit smokin'."

Kokoa cringed when he looked up for the first time that night and made eye contact with the bartender. He spun the ashtray in circles on the shellacked surface.

"Just like grandma's old kitchen floors."

"What?" Armand started to look annoyed .

"Nothing, just fleeting thoughts." Kokoa didn't even realize he had said it aloud. It had been a long day... but then again – what day that ends you at a bar by yourself isn't a long one? Armand slapped a second napkin on the hard surface at the far end of the bar and planted a chilled glass on it.

"Slide that down here."

"If you want it bad enough, you can get off your lazy ass to get it.... long day or not."

Kokoa started to slip off his bar stool when the wall behind the bar cracked, crumbled and erupted. A train came bustling through. The bar room collapsed revealing an entire subway behind these brick walls. A girl sat on a bench. Confused but not scared, he noticed the tight black clothes used to look spray painted on her body, but not now. Her hair was always gelled, and pulled back; her silver glasses fit her narrow face perfectly as she swiftly glided in heels, but not now. Now, the nauseating colored, mesh fabric material hung lifelessly off all aspects of her body. She looked like a bird with broken wings struggling to prance upward into flight. Her hair was down showing off frayed split ends. It looked like she had just crawled out of bed after participating in the most wild, passionate night she'd ever experienced. Toes still curled in the tips of her tennis shoes, as if she was hiding her shame. This girl awaiting the halt of the train could have been a bartender who could be dyed drag queens that look plaid against neutral gallery walls of dazzling mai tai and silky peanut butter. Queens could be jokers dressed as kings could be lovers in bars that were hobos in past lives who wore gritty baseball caps after dark. Imagine the little drummer boys and girls of the subway with junkie sleeves slamming plastic trash pails in a spicy quartet. Blind eyes listened to the violin once again.

REMEMBER WHEN

Nicholas Gracie

They ask me if I remember when I first walked through the doors of my elementary school. I tell them, "No." They ask me if I can remember what I got for my thirteenth birthday. I tell them, "No." They ask me if I can remember what I did yesterday, and I tell them rather irritably, that I was sitting in this same uncomfortable chair, in this same uncomfortable room, telling these same people that no, I don't remember when that happened.

Here I sit. I am surrounded by men and women, some in suits, some in white aprons, and twice again as many holding clipboards, looking at me askew, biting on the tips of their pens, and writing down whatever it is that they write down. A man sits on the couch outside the room when he is not pacing up and down the corridor interrogating everyone he sees, and a woman sits here next to me, holding my hand, asking me to try and remember. She cries more often than not when I tell her I don't remember.

I just can't remember.

My hands are all bandaged up, and they show me a picture of a car. I don't remember having ever seen it before. They show me a picture of another car—though they tell me that it is the same car—and the front end is all smashed in, and it looks like it has burned. Then they show me a picture of a young man. I tell them I don't know whom the picture is of, though he looks like me, only a little older. The woman says his name was Charlie, and that the picture was taken the night he graduated college.

I guess I looked up to him, Charlie I mean, but I don't remember having ever seen him before.

This goes on for hours, for days and days, and the only answer I seem to be able to give them is *no*. It is like I was dropped down from the sky and put onto the bed that I woke up on. I don't remember anything before that, and the lady who had been holding my hand when I woke up told me that she was my mother, and that the haggard-looking man was my father. I don't

remember them, but they both seem honest. So I believe them. She told me that I had been in a car accident, and that my brother was dead. She tells me that was three weeks ago.

Seven months later, there are fourteen candles on a birthday cake. I got a bicycle.

BABY

Jamie Pawlowicz

“Goodness, look at the time. We have to start dinner. It has been a very productive day. We finished all of the laundry – washed, dried and folded; we cleaned the house and finally scrubbed the bathroom clean of the rust stains that tainted the porcelain tub, sink and toilet. We got all of the shopping done and put away. Oh my, and the dishes, cleaned and dried all by hand. That pesky dishwasher gave us quite a hard time. I’m just glad that we could get the water to stop pouring onto the floor. I guess it helped out when we were going to mop the floor, huh baby. Only dinner remains.”

A sweet aroma filled the kitchen.

“I love you baby, I don’t know what I would ever do with out you. You fill me with so much joy.”

Slam!! The apartment door was shut with fury.

“Why is dinner not on the table? You lazy bitch! Hurry up!” screamed her not-so significant other.

“If you being pregnant is going to make you slow and lazy then get rid of the fuckin’ thing like I told you in the fist place!”

“It will never happen again” she sighed, standing there with her arm wrapped around her stomach and her eyes staring at nothing and everything all at once.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Jamie Pawlowicz

I'm gonna leave him, finally gonna leave him. That was it. He can't hit me! What am I 'spose to tell people. I am covered with marks from him. I'm gonna get up off the toilet seat and I'm just going to pack my things. I can do it. He can't stop me. I'll scream if he tries. I can go to my moms. I'll tell her what happened. She will let me stay there. I will finally get away. I love him so much.

"Get out of there honey, I'm sorry, can't we talk?"
"NO, I'm leavin'."

"Leavin'? Why would ya do that? I know I was outta line but you know not to push my buttons like that, I can't control myself, It's not my fault".

I can't hear anymore of this. I'll turn off the shower, That's better. Not his fault. He did it. How can it be not his fault? That's stupid. I did push him though. I put my hands on him first. Why did I do that? After being with him for so long I know how to get him goin'. I did start the fight. I wish everything didn't happen so fast. I would know for sure who was to blame. Was it me? I have been pissy and I took it out on him. The dishes weren't that important. God, what was I thinkin', I had just let it go then none of this woulda happened. I don't want to leave. I love him. How could I be without him?

She got up and turned off the shower, opened the door and gave him a big hug to make sure he knew that everything was going to be okay.

INNOCENCE

Jamie Pawlowicz

Mr. Handsom: Do u wanna come over?

Cutiegrl101: sure

Mr. Handsom: do ur parents know u r goin 2 an older guys place?

Cutiegrl101: maybe

“Do you like me?”

“Yes.”

“You know you should show people how much you care?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to go all the way?”

“No, No, NO...”

“Was it as good for you as it was for me?”

FREE

Alyson Bourassa

They found her in a pool of her own blood, face turned to the right, smiling. Her dark purple eyeliner ran down her cheeks, making spirals in the blood that caressed her face. Before that she stood on the balcony of her foster parents' apartment.

They said they loved her, they cared, and they wanted to get her help, but they never listened. Every night for eight months, every day since her parents died she had been having visions; seeing and hearing things that according to the rest of the world "weren't real." Her foster parents, being a normal lawyer and an average salesman, did what any other parents would do. With that Helena was medicated and monitored. With every dose it seemed the doctor was trying to kill what she saw as a gift, and they, her foster parents, were left repeating the doctor's words as their own.

"You'll be fine, you'll see. Everything will be ok." Of all the phrases she had ever heard it was that one she hated most.

"Had I been allowed to have my form back, everything would be ok," she thought. "If they'd stop shoving pills down my throat, everything would be ok. If they'd just realize what I see is real, then everything would be ok."

"Alas, they will never see us my dear." Recognizing the soft coo of Kestrel's voice her spirits lifted. "Where have you been?" Helena whispered fiercely. She could not speak too loudly or Tina and Martian would hear. "I went for a glide," Kestrel said, tossing her silver wings around playfully, "Why.....jealous you couldn't fly with me little one?" THWAK!!! The pillow hit the dragon square in the face, then plopped to the carpet. "Don't call me little one, especially in that patronizing tone! You know in my real form I was bigger than you!"

With that Helena wrapped her arms around the dragon's neck. "Will they ever believe me?" she sobbed into the leathery hide, loving the smooth warmth she missed so dearly. "No, most likely not. Mortals these days are extremely close minded and

cannot see what cannot be captured on film. Granted their predecessors had the gift, and our kind suffered the consequences. St. George, heroic dragon slayer, HA!" At that Kestrel began puffing smoke rings through her nostrils, trying to relieve the rage that built up anytime the knight entered her thoughts. "It's okay," Helena said, trying to comfort her childhood friend. She had already heard the story while she was in the hospital.

After the accident that stole her parents away, Helena lay dormant in a coma that lasted two weeks. During that time the dragons spoke to her, teaching her all about their kind and about her true identity. Trapped in a mortal's ridiculous body was the soul of a true dragon. "You're safer in a human body," Helena thought sarcastically, rolling her eyes in the moonlight. She had learned that her soul had been reborn many times, but her soul-birth was her true self, and in that first life she and the hatchling Kestrel had spent long days flying low over meadows, chasing their would-be cousins, the dragonflies.

As the dragons, her real family as she saw them, told her of her glorious winged past the memories started to come back. When she awoke from her coma she felt as though it was the first time she had ever really been awake. There in front of her stood her foster parents, the doctor, the nurse, and behind them Kestrel, making faces as usual. Helena had tried to talk to her mortal caretakers, but they saw dragons as silly lizards with wings that were made up to sell movies and toys. When Helena tried to explain what she had learned they called the doctor and the meds started. After three months of talking with Kestrel she had found a loophole. She simply stopped talking about the dragons she saw. She claimed the hallucinations had stopped, that the meds were working, and that she was happy.

Another month of testing and observing and the pills were no longer necessary. One more month and she no longer needed therapy. Four more weeks and they all saw her as a girl who was "adjusting well and coping." She kept her winged friends to herself, understanding that no mortal would understand. She never mentioned the fact that when she looked in a mirror, she saw a beautiful dragon staring back at her, or that when the wind blew she could feel it on her wings. She had once been a dark green goddess, with spirals of iridescent purple throughout her scales, purple that matched her wings.

"God damn it I'm a dragon!" She had shouted this a little too loudly. "Hunny, is everything okay?" Tina called from down the hall. "Fine, fine, sorry Tina, I uh, stubbed my toe."

"You're lying," Kestrel said, poking Helena in the ribs with her tail. "Okay sweetie, you just call if you need anything." With that Tina went on down the hall and Helena shut the door. No one could come in until she was done.

"Kestrel, I'm doing it tonight. I can't stand this shell any longer."

"Are you sure? There really is no going back. There are things humans can do that we can't, you know." As Helena opened the door to her balcony, she looked to the starry sky. Right above her was the constellation Draco; she took it as sign. "All humans do is buy, kill, and sell things. They are an ignorant species, one whose existence revolves around feeling bad for themselves."

She looked at her oldest friend and spoke, clear and calm. "I'm ready to come home now." Kestrel only nodded and stepped out of the way. "Do you know what to do?"

With a steady nod Helena walked across the room to her door, and opened it. She walked to her bureau and grabbed the purple eyeliner she had been saving for this moment. She painted herself with thick eyeliner of deep purple and black nail polish. In her mind she was a little closer to resembling her dragon self, but she knew that to the mortals who would see her, she'd look like a little gothic girl, another statistic and nothing more. She wrote the note for her parents and placed it on the desk. "I want to be with my real family," was all that it said. With that she let out a scream, sounding like an eagle on her dive in for the kill, and ran towards the open window. She leapt off the railing and flew upward, finally free.

"Are you sure you don't want to stick around?" Kestrel shouted, having to flap her wings hard to catch up. "I've waited long enough now try to keep up Little one!" the dragon Helena shouted back. "HEY!!!" With that the two friends flew home, wings spread wide and glistening in the full moon's light. No one looked up, they would have seen only the night sky if they did. Helena never looked down, never looked back. Her soul was free at last, and that was all that mattered.

HOPEFUL IMAGINATION

Alyson Bourassa

Do you remember when you were a child, and you first were told about Santa? That joy that filled your heart on Christmas morning when you discovered the pile of gifts under the tree was only surpassed by the wonder you felt. You were so filled with awe that morning because despite your youth, you knew that the presence of gifts under the tree meant that the jolly red man your parents told you about was real.

Later in life, upon the terrible discovery that Santa existed only in your most naïve of hearts, you experienced the cold grip of reality's despair. With that knowledge, and the sad understanding that life's most wonderful experiences are made thus because of your own imagination, you started to grow up, convinced that nothing would ever fill you with as much joy as that first Christmas.

Now you're older, in college, living on your own in the real world.

You have not let your imagination die though; you read books and draw pictures, and you write to create worlds, worlds powered by imagination. You find comfort in your fantasies, knowing that even if these things can only exist in your dreams, at least they are at home there.

Now you're in a car, after flying for a day from Boston to Reno, on your way to a hidden place in the real world, where imagination is not a marketing gimmick.

You are on your way to a festival of eight days and nights, which happens only once a year. You've spent the past two months preparing, letting your imagination materialize. You've made costumes and sculptures, you've done sketches and written poems, but you know that you are going to a place where even your wildest of imaginings will not compare to what you will actually see.

The flight was uncomfortable, the car you're riding in is cramped, but the cold of the desert night is kissing your cheek through the window. "There are advantages to getting here early" you think aloud. The city gates open at midnight and you have arrived at 9pm, hoping to get in early. Alas, rules are rules you find, and you and your carload of friends are sent to wait in what appears to be a parking lot with your fellow early Burners.

You wait for hours to be allowed into the City, passing the time by walking around and talking to other Burners. In the distance, a mile of flat broken earth away, you see her. Your City, she's glowing green tonight and she's right there. You put out a hand, asking to be held in her embrace. As you start to cry you see fire erupt from one of the city spires; she is comforting you and welcoming you in. All your years of dreaming and hoping and wishing have finally paid off. Every picture you've drawn, every story you've written had found their home in a world of your creation, one that you thought only existed in your mind. As you hear the distant hum of music emanating from the City, you feel that childhood wonder pulsing through you and your creations are home.

Now, finally, you too can go home.

The cars are moving now; you know the gates have been opened. Shouts of joy and eruptions of laughter abound, all from the cars around you. Everyone is as happy to be going home as you are. As you peer out the window you look towards your city. She's getting larger, growing closer, and your vision is clearing. You can see details now, geodesic domes and large sculptures illuminated by fluorescent green spot lights. The steady pulse of the electronic beat moves the crowds forward and calls you in.

Now the car is parked, the tents are set up, and the pure euphoria is bursting from your lungs as you howl at the moon with your friends; you enjoy a primal homecoming with your pack.

For the next eight days you will be in paradise. You'll meet wonderful and magical people. You'll see things you've never thought of. You'll be happier than you've ever been or dreamed you'd be. You and your city are going to a beacon of hope to the universe. You and your fellow Burners will provide the undisputable proof that people from all over the world can coexist happily. When it's all over you will be sad for a moment, but the sadness never lasts.

It is the highest point in your life thus far, and you know you'll be back next year. It gave you hope, for yourself and for humanity. When you leave the gates it seems as though a lifetime had passed since when you entered. You strain your neck out the car window, hoping that by holding the City in your gaze the experience will never end.

You have been changed by this event.

A memory of your grandparents floats in on the breeze, of them looking back and talking about "the good times," and you know this to be one of yours. You've been to the Magical City, the place from which the future will blossom. As you find yourself on paved road, the only thing you can see now is the line of cars trailing back to infinity and your city. As you pull your head back in the car you sigh and begin trading stories about your week with your friends. Life is good, you think to yourself. The sadness of separation has left you. You realize that this is not an end, but a beginning.

You'll go back, but this time the car won't seem as cramped, nor the plane as uncomfortable. For the rest of your life nothing will ever bother you the way it once did; nothing will ever feel as hopeless as it did before Burning Man. Hope is the city, so you carry her with you. Suddenly you know what you want to do when you get back to Boston. You're going to write about Burning Man, and if you do it well you hope to inspire in others the optimism that now courses through your veins.

Now you are the person you had always wanted to be.

You are the child who has traveled to the North Pole, had tea with Santa and seen his reindeer, and the adult who knows that the future is bright as the full moon. All fears of an impending eclipse have been washed away, for now you know that paradise exists.

Now you know.

DEATH AND SNOWFLAKES

Alyson Bourassa

Last night I sat in the dark, watching the snow flutter like moths beyond my window, thinking about the cold world outside. Under my blanket of downy feather and kept warm from the Earth's cold shoulder, I allowed my mind to wander. Out the window, through the snow, down the road and onward my mind flew.

With closed eyes I coasted down paved hills of cold powder. The plows had yet to clear the streets, so for that moment they were my playground. When I was a child everywhere and anything had been my playground. Memories of those fleeting years of freedom now lay frozen in what I must reluctantly call the past. At the time I remember thinking they would never end. Those moments were mine, as every moment had always been, then.

I scuffed through the snow banks of my mind, rousing more moths that had lay down, cold and dreaming. I could feel the cold wind biting and gnawing at my fingers and suddenly wished I had worn gloves on this walk. Every memory of everything I said I wanted to do stabbed at my lungs like so many icicles. I felt the cold regret strangle me; I had had so many plans for the future. I had so many dreams back then. Everything had seemed possible, and no dream was too far out of reach. I felt the cold grip tighten, the frozen fear strangled me and Darkness was calling.

I could hardly breathe as the icy fingers around my throat tightened further. I could feel the future dying, was I dying too? All the things I had left undone, half finished, un-started, what of them? What would happen? I turned my head, straining to see the face of my assailant. Who belonged to the frostbitten fingers that were choking me, killing me? The wind's wolves howled and surrounded me. I fought, kicked, did everything I could to get away. Unsuccessfully, and I still did not know who was killing me!

I could feel the life leaving me, Darkness wanted me, but I would not go willingly. In the failing light, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her. Reflected in Winter's roof-rooted stalactite was a younger me, choking me! I grew dizzy, gasping now for the air I needed. Confusion swirled like a memory driven tornado.

"Why?" I managed to croak, my last pleading attempt at self preservation. As soon as the word escaped my lips, I knew the answer. The younger girl was my past, free of the fear that often paralyzed my adult self. I closed my eyes, and then there was nothing.

I awoke in the familiar darkness of my bedroom, my cold cheek resting on the window. I glanced around and found no wolves, felt no fear, felt no scarf of icy death around my neck; just my cat, asleep at my feet. As I pulled the blankets tighter around my body I caught my reflection in the glass. I looked younger, but wiser somehow. The fear of death had left me; the wasps of the what-ifs of my future were no longer stinging. I felt surprisingly refreshed, happy in the knowledge I had gained in my sleep.

All I have is this moment, right now. My future is what is happening right now. The memories of the past seemed brighter and more wonderful because everything I'd ever done then was in-the-moment, at that moment. The future is just the moments that have not yet come, and they are nothing to be feared. There are so many unknowns in this cold world and to live in fear is to get buried in the snow.

I'd rather stay here, warm in my awareness of the wonders to come.

POWER OF DREAMS

Andrew Mello

Eyes closed on the screen
Of trees and bees symbiotically pollinating
a more fertile feast on which us beasts
can sustain the time which we are allotted

In this chaotic universe there is
Just enough balance to sustain life
One sway to the left or right
Could mean calamity collectively
like grains of sand blending onto the beach
we won't be missed
in this cold empty space, we vanish without a trace

Such a far away vision I can see
Floating above it all
An observer not in this physical realm
Actively becoming aware while
lucidly proceeding to change everything
Bending to my will inside the dream
Parameters from which my mind conceived
This is closest to god we can come to in this world
This is the power of dreams

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

Andrew Mello

Bottled up and shaken
Bursting toward the ceiling
evaporating into your room
They let you out too soon
The suns eyes want to get hold of you
With no excuse to avoid its gaze
You stay indoors all the-days
You'll be safe so the scientist says
Evade the UV rays
So your cells don't disarray
In a mess of hay wired tangled webs
Of neuron nets ebbing together
The choices begin to add up
To the point of your life, if you could think that deep
Out side your phone calls and social gatherings
Work and all those distracting things
The question remains
What do you want to add up to
What is the sum of your life
Choose accordingly

WAR OF THE SONS OF LIGHT AGAINST THE SONS OF DARKNESS

Andrew Mello

an everlasting battle
two men with unlike opinions
sending off citizens
like personal hoards of minions,
slaves beg to be free
their backs slashed so they always agree
never to disobey
or pain will come their way
no matter what they say
pain will come their way
two kings atop their throne
both built of blood, tears, and bone

thinking they are justified in action
as the opposition commits an Infraction
to the books of rules
written by the past rule
where intent has been forgotten
slaves in the field of cotton
and the only word that means anything
is the will of the king
with words like god
or as close as one can become
two kings atop their throne
both built of blood, tears, and bone
in power, words are that of god
or as close as one can become
sitting upon their throne, alone
made of blood, tears, and bone

linked circles of metal
fix prisoners to the wall

the snap of the whip
wounds open and blood falls
in pools around the feet
dripping from the open skin
minds seething with heat
thinking the most vile sin
they can commit
and so war goes on
constant loops of revenge
casting hate to get hate back
sons of light and sons of dark
both are equal just as stark
angels and monsters
are the same
hungry for blood
of the opposing force
the source of loathing
only after will anyone feel remorse
people will be played
like they exist to serve
one day, kings will get what they deserve
stomping out the verve
naturally apparent in their
falsely justified heard

Bells sing through the night
Signaling the people into frenzied fright
As vessels above shower light
Torching cities with a flick of a switch
Creating wounds that cannot be mended by stitch
Pipe lines burst open like a can of food
Spraying gas to feed the flame
Not even water can attempt to tame
The tower of flames spiraling around
A view enhanced by sound
God fearing men, bound by a book
Too scared to look
At what their town has become
A pile of flames, burnt brick and flesh
Melting in a stew of sadness

the charcoal sea will seamlessly mesh
Till no one can tell the difference in the shade
Black and grey blood burned bricks looks the same
Those who saw and those who came
Never went back home the same
To end this deadly game of blame
A swift thunder crashed down
upon the head that bore the crown
freeing people from injustice
only for another coward
to sit on that throne
made of blood, tears, and bone

CHANCES: CHAPTER ONE

Stephanie Vedoe

There was a careful knock on my door at 6:55, Mike always seemed to be punctually on time. I had figured that an interior designer at 23 could keep a room clean, but my life was going at full speed and there was no time to stay at home. My studio apartment suddenly seemed larger than usual as I was rushing to find the pearl necklace Mike had given me for my 21st birthday. He always had chosen the perfect gift that he knew I would love.

“Sarah, are you going to make me stand out here and wait?” Mike knocked on the door again. “I figured I could at least find some humor in you rushing around in your ridiculous heels.” I laughed to myself, he really did know me too well. “It’s open.” I yelled as I clasped the pearls I had finally found hiding under my pile of socks on the couch. I grabbed my purse, rummaging through, hoping to find something I didn’t know I was looking for, grabbed my cell phone, and met Mike at the door.

Mike looked like he had just come from a business meeting, a little disheveled, but that was a new part of his charm. “Sorry, sorry, I’m ready.” I smiled up at Mike. “You look wonderful, let’s get going.” Mike put his arm around me and walked with me out the door. “So what will it be tonight?” I looked at Mike with wide eyes as we walked down the hallway. He had a way with plans. They were never concrete but always ended in a corner café talking about the insanity of the night. We always appeared to be grown up, but deep down, we were little kids roaming a big city. “How do you feel about a laid back night? I know from day one you told me I had to keep you on your toes... but I feel that tonight needs to be different.” Mike opened the door and we walked down the steps to the sidewalk. “Thai food and bobba? Like old times?” Mike grinned, “Perfect.”

He opened the car door for me. The black leather was still warm from the hot day.

As he walked around the front of the car, I felt as though I was falling in love at the sight of him all over again. It had been more than a year since we had been on an actual ‘date’. Or whatever this was considered.

I had coached myself all day, telling myself not to think about the year that had passed. But now, I was nervous. I could feel my teeth biting down on my lip to stop my mouth from forming words that would cause him to run away again. Mike had disappeared for a while, moved away with no goodbye. I called him nearly every day, and received not one call back. After a few months, I gave up. I didn’t understand how a friend could pack up and leave. It was my junior year of college, and Mike was gone. It was as if he had vanished.

At that time I had been wondering where we were headed in our relationship... friendship, whichever term was appropriate to use, I didn’t know. Even while he was gone, I had hopes for us, but felt like if I held on too long to that hope, I could be left disappointed. We had seen each other graduate from high school. We helped each other move to Boston, a dream we both had in common. We watched each other go through break ups and healing, and then falling all over again.

To everyone else we were “the cutest couple they had ever seen,” but we were just friends, who understood and loved each other like friends do. It took us time to see that what we had wanted, or what I had wanted, was right in front of me.

About a year and a half later, which fell two weeks ago, I was buying gallons of water in the local grocery store to bring to my parents whose well had gone dry; and there was Mike. The simplicity and complexity of my grocery store visit was so much so that I couldn’t understand how we would possibly be in the same place at the same time. I didn’t have to go get the water, my brother could have, anyone could have. But there he was. An unrecognizably sophisticated Mike strolling the aisles with his little sister who was the only clue to who he was. The details have faded now, all I could focus on was Mike, standing in front of me, and the chances of him even saying, “We should catch up.” After a year of nothing he finally wanted to talk. But I was so overcome with surprise that I just had to smile and forgive for the moment. He asked for my number, and even though I had his memorized I

asked for his too in an effort to appear I had been nonchalant about him for the past year. The whole thing is a blur really. And I can honestly say I didn't expect to hear from him. I muttered something about Boston and was interrupted with "I'm working in Back Bay right now." We searched for a sufficient brief summary of life in the past year or so, and we went our separate ways.

Mike had come back, to Boston of all places. I remember feeling like a year of thoughts were being set on fire, and jumping back and forth in my head. Did my family know Mike was back? Why wouldn't they say anything? Even stranger, maybe I had unknowingly passed him on the street, subway, in a cab, in a bar, restaurant, concert, pub, art exhibit, and I probably had. But I could notice him, *that day*, in the grocery store.

Now I am sitting in his car waiting for him to explain the past year, and becoming angry because he was acting as if nothing happened. My thoughts were fast and making me anxious. I had never felt so strongly torn between two emotions. I couldn't believe that Mike could sit there and act like things were back to normal, but I also couldn't believe that Mike was sitting there in the car next to me. I could do nothing but smile.

FARID THOMAS AND THE SECRETS OF TIME

CHAPTER ONE: MARGARET'S WOES

Nicholas Gracie

If you were to ever have the distinct privilege of asking Margaret Magwitch to describe herself in five words or less, she would likely be forced to tell you quite matter-of-factly that she is “utterly perfect in every way.” How else would a woman who was completely indifferent to anything and everything so long as she maintained a charismatic pretense describe herself?

On any typical day, Margaret Magwitch would awake to the sound of her extremely cute, puppy-dog face alarm clock at 5:30 in the morning, every morning, except of course on the weekends when she allowed herself an extra thirty minutes of sleep. Usually she felt quite peppy and full of life in the mornings, and as she so often put it, “ready to tackle the day’s events.”

Only, on the morning of the first of July, the day our story starts, she was feeling rather groggy, and longed for that extra thirty minutes of lying in her bed. She quietly whispered what she always called a “dirty word” to the children so that if there were any listening ears, they couldn’t hear.

Regrettably she crawled out of bed, threw on her morning robes, and put up her hair into a quick kerchief before she would have to make her way downstairs to cook breakfast for all four of the children.

No, Margaret was not a mother, though she claimed to have an ever-lasting ardor for all children. In fact, she was not a wife either. “Boys befuddle the mind,” she would tell the girls every time they snickered about how cute a boy was from school. Ironically she said the same thing to the boys about girls. She still believed it nonetheless. “You can’t preach what you don’t believe.”

Truth be told, she was many years divorced after a very short reign with that bloke of a husband she had married. He had said that she was, "too much work and utterly unbearable" and left. But what was in the past was nothing of concern unless it affected the future; Margaret would tell you if you asked her.

Margaret Magwitch was the caretaker of Marge's Abode for Blessed Children—Marge being her preferred name to Margaret. She had strongly believed at the time when she was naming her vocation, that orphanage sounded too overbearing, and that all children truly were blessed; now she might have used mischievous.

Routine in the morning for Margaret consisted of cooking breakfast for the four children, and clicking on the weather at exactly a quarter past seven as to watch her true fancy, Christopher Bisbee...and to catch the weather of course. "...Clear and sunny folks, with a temperature high of eighty four degrees..." She could almost feel her knees trembling as weatherman Bisbee's rich and dreamy voice spoke with such masculine pride and dignity; and that smile of his behind those crimson red lips and bleach white teeth... "And that is all for the weather folks. I am Christopher Bisbee..." She often missed most of the broadcast daydreaming.

Picking out her most fashionable summer dress—Margaret Magwitch claimed she was always one year ahead of the current fashion; and she actually believed it despite whether or not it proved true—she dressed herself for the day. A grin widened across her face just thinking about just how clever she thought she truly was.

Every morning during the week, Margaret stood out at the corner of Rolan Avenue —her house was number thirty-two—with the other mothers, gossiping, while waiting for the public school bus to arrive.

"Those are very cute sandals, Joyce," flattered a lady named Kris, who was still wearing her morning robes, with her cup of coffee in one hand, and the newspaper in her other.

"Didn't I tell you? No? Well I must...Harold almost died when I told him..." This morning wasn't at all exciting. The juiciest bit of gossip was the break up of some celebrity couple, but Margaret didn't catch the name. She didn't care much for the rich and famous anyway.

Glancing down at her wrist watch she silently uttered a curse. The bus was late, again. Though the bus wasn't what was really on Margaret's mind this morning. Nor was the gossiping; these were her least favorite people in the world to gossip with, seeing as how they were all very boring. In fact, she was wondering whether or not she would have time to sneak a peek into Perfect Panzy's garden next door.

It was now a quarter past eight.

Just then, Margaret noticed for the first time the movers carrying several pieces of furniture of the most peculiar décor into number thirty Rolan Avenue. How could she have missed something like that?

"Good heavens," she said rather over-excitedly, "new neighbors!"

Seeing as how all of the other mother's were boring, none seemed to get at all anxious over the idea of having new neighbors, and kept on talking about pointless, petty gossip that Margaret cared nothing about. However, Margaret Magwitch's heart was suddenly pumping, and she was growing more and more fidgety at the thought of being the first to welcome the new neighbors to Rolan Avenue. She nearly jumped out of her skin when the sound of a school bus door made a loud screech as it slid open not two feet away.

"Do try and have a good day, my dears!" she called out above the other mothers, with her fake smile, and her fake laugh, and her fake act that she was truly sad to see the children off. "Have a wonderful day at school!" No, she had more important things to do today; especially today.

Waiting impatiently until the last child was aboard, and the bus was disappearing down another street, Margaret dashed off as quickly as could without seeming to be in a hurry to meet her new neighbors, all the while hoping that they would be just as charismatic as she herself was. There wasn't a person in the world that she could imagine who wouldn't be enthused to have her as their neighbor. After all, she was Margaret Magwitch...utterly perfect in every way.

Only, she had just made it to her neighbor's...mailbox. It was the most peculiar mailbox she had ever seen! At first she wasn't even sure what it was, but what else sat on the side of the road, atop a four-foot high post sticking up out of the ground? But

this particular mailbox was painted like an owl. Perhaps her new neighbors were outdoorsy people? If that was their only oddity, she could learn to adjust...

"Oh my dear," she whispered to herself as she got even closer, and then her feet failed her.

This most peculiar looking mailbox suddenly was indeed the strangest thing she ever did see. And strange and Margaret Magwitch don't mix. The mailbox was not at all painted as she had thought, but it was instead a real stuffed owl, with a wing that went up for the flag!

Nine times out of ten she would have called anybody even remotely associated with an oddity—and this was most certainly an oddity—crazy. But she thought she would make an exception just this once. She didn't want to be prejudiced before meeting her new neighbors first. After all, she was a heart warming woman.

And care giving, she thought to herself haughtily, letting loose a faint snicker at just how wonderful she thought she was.

However, she had only gone a few steps towards her new neighbors' driveway when two men came walking towards her wearing the strangest clothing she had ever laid eyes on, except maybe on Halloween. But the two men walked straight past her without so much as even acknowledging her!

Well, another small tidbit about Margaret Magwitch is that ignoring her does not settle with her. She was as nosey as a bumblebee, and as restrained as a closed door. She would tell this duo just what her thoughts on walking past her truly were...

"Didn't you know?" one of the men was saying.

"Oh yes, Ravil."

"Why do you think we were reassigned?"

"Yes, yes! Of course! The boy's parents were murdered!"

Margaret grimaced. Of course she had only misunderstood what the man had called his friend. It must have been Raphael. But did she hear right about what they were taking about...murder?

"Murdered don't you say?"

"A pity it had to happen to such people. Never have I esteemed any two people more."

There was a long pause, and Margaret couldn't get her feet to move. These men were talking about murder as freely as people

talked over what fruit to buy at the market! It had to be the empty stomach she had, and she was just getting drowsy...

"But I must say, Finn, I think we are not in the correct attire. These people that live here wear slacks and casual clothing."

"Quite right, Ravil, I wonder if they wear their robes indoors instead of out. Or maybe it's a daytime and nighttime custom here?"

"I think you might have hit upon something, Finn."

All of a sudden the two men stopped just as they were walking up the driveway and glanced up and down the street, as if pondering the question at hand. When their eyes met Margaret's they lingered for a few unpleasantly long seconds before they each bowed their heads and turned back up the driveway.

"I think that is her, Finn," the man said, making no attempt whatsoever to keep his voice from being heard.

"Must be, but let's get inside before one of these people sends a post to...what are they called again, Ravil...The pole men?

"Police men, Finn; and they don't use post porters here. They have something called a telephone."

Scurrying off towards the door, Margaret watched as one of the men made a quick movement with his hand and the door swung open for them. *I must really be getting drowsy*, she convinced herself, and ignored what she thought she had just witnessed.

Murderers, she thought sourly, as if the thought itself brought about an unpleasant taste. *And the police might be after them no less!*

Without even a moment's hesitation, or a second look back, she strode on past her crazy new neighbor's house and right past her own. She would not have any sort of connection with people who talked about murdering people so freely, and kept stuffed owls as their mailbox!

I like my life just the way it is, thank you very much. Never again would she second guess giving a weirdo, or anyone in the least bit strange, a chance.

It was probably for the better that she never did realize all of the other oddities that her new neighbors had scattered around their yard: a simmering cauldron sat on the front porch giving off a repugnant smell of rotten eggs, bats and owls fluttered about and

hung from the tops of the gutters, and tabby cats were sitting on every single windowsill in the front of the house.

Being free of the time it would have taken to have met the new neighbors, Margaret could now scope out Perfect Panzy's rose garden before her hair appointment — Perfect Panzy was Margaret's nickname for Roberta Panzy because Roberta thought that she was ever so special. The thought could have made Margaret sick. Clearly they were not friends in the least, and as far as Margaret was concerned, Perfect Panzy was too strange to associate with anyway.

To her immense pleasure, Perfect Panzy's rose garden wasn't at all of any competition this year as far as Margaret was concerned. Roberta's garden was full of half-withered, droopy, not even scarlet colored roses, with very few not so sickly looking roses, though back at thirty-two Rolan Avenue the rose garden was packed full with deep crimson petal roses, without a single flower that looked withered or droopy. Twice a week Margaret cut down her sickening flowers and catered to all the rest. Just the thought of having the better flower garden put Margaret's favorite kind of smile on her face—a smile of triumph over someone. Not that that was saying much. But now it was time to get ready for her hair appointment. Most would have called her smile sinister.

"Tell me again, Molly," Margaret said cheerfully to the lady sitting next to her at the stylist, "do you like the new color I chose for my hair? I have a very important appointment tonight for a new adoption, didn't you know?" Margaret Magwtich might be a closed door, but when it came to anything that even remotely helped keep up her self image, she expected everyone to know. "Though of course I will take in the blessed child so he can grow up in a loving environment, and I want to look my best. First impressions are, after all, half the battle." She spoke in an, *as if I would do anything but adopt this child* tone.

The woman glowered at Margaret, though she took no notice. "Yes, Margaret, I think your new cheeky red hair looks wonderful." There was no mistaking the strong hint of sarcasm in her voice, but then she added, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "I just think you like to hear it, Margaret."

Well, maybe it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Smiling, Margaret chose not to retort. Having put aside the oddest people she had ever met in her life—and now had as next

door neighbors—and after seeing that her own rose garden was far superior to her snobby neighbor, Perfect Panzy, she was in much too good a mood to take Molly's tone to heart.

"Thank you, Molly. I am very thankful."

Rushing home after an afternoon of errands, and getting all of the children off of the school bus, Margaret had only one thing on her mind before her appointment later that night, and she handed out tasks to each of the four children.

"Now, now, my dears, we don't want our home all cluttered. We want our new blessed family member to feel welcomed when he arrives." Whether from complete love and devotion, or fear, when she said frog, the children hopped.

Reluctantly the children set to vacuuming the floors and rugs, dusting all the lamps and tables, organizing all of the games and fun time activities scattered around the house, and washing all the dirty dishes by hand—a task that built character she told the children—for the remainder of the afternoon. When Marge's Abode for Blessed Children was cleaned, it looked just as good as it did after spring cleaning.

"Now children," she said, "run along and change into your best outfits, in case my appointment wishes to meet you all." They all ran off excitedly.

Just as the clock chimed eight o'clock that night, the doorbell rang. Half in shock that whoever had asked for this appointment—they had kept their name anonymous—were right on schedule. Margaret hurried the children off to the living room to watch some program as she made to greet her appointment.

As to be expected, Margaret Magwitch had it set in her mind that her day had already had all of the strangeness as it could have possibly held with people who were strange and didn't deserve the luxury of her company. Only, she never would have guessed that the real strangeness of her day was just now beginning. Not to mention that she never thought anyone of any abnormality would have had the nerve to come to her humble home.

Standing there underneath the spotlight outside, cradling a baby wrapped in a blanket in his arms, was about the strangest looking person Margaret could ever have imagined. This man standing on the doorstep of her abnormal-free home was someone whose every aspect was screaming with the effects of old age.

Behind the gray beard that was so long that it had to be held together by two golden rings, was the pale face of only a slightly wrinkled old man. His gray robes with purple and gold embroidery hung loosely over his tall, gangly body. Even the man's eyes were strange, for they were of such a bright essence of blue that Margaret thought they had to have been fake. That was until they moved. He even wore a tattered old traveling cloak.

Margaret suddenly felt as if she had been hit over the head. Her mouth hung open, dumbstruck, and she could not find the words to tell the man to leave, though he didn't look at all in least bit frightening. In fact, he looked anything but frightening—almost welcoming!

"Perhaps you will permit me to come in?" the gangly, most strange man asked after having stood outside for a long while, while Margaret merely gazed at him, not uttering a word. "Seeing as how I have a child who has not reached the age of one yet in my arms, I will pretend you have welcomed me into your home." And the man did enter without waiting for any type of response.

Settling into a high backed chair, the man gestured towards another chair for Margaret, and then said with all the courtesy in the world, "Please sit down, before you fall from lack of breathing." It was not a question. After all, the man was wizened well beyond even his many years. He let out a barely audible chuckle in spite of himself.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "My name is Alvin Castor Bebel Minkleton. You may, of course, call me what you like, but I very much prefer Minkleton. Has a bit of a ring to it, don't you think?"

For the first time in her life, Margaret Magwitch found herself paralyzed from thinking of a single word to say, though she took the seat gratefully, as if she were a guest in Minkleton's home. She continued to stare as though she expected to wake up from this very bad dream.

Continuing on as if Margaret were fully initiated in this conversation, talking and answering questions for the poor old man, Minkleton went on to say in a very calm and very friendly manner, "How about a cup of tea while we talk, Margaret? Let us at least enjoy the compliments and pleasantries of indulgence. It might also help with your nerves, you know."

Alvin Minkleton raised a hand from under his robes and snapped two of his fingers. A silver tray suddenly appeared from out of thin air, full with a tea pot and two cups, hovering between the two people. Then as if there was an invisible hand, the pot poured itself into the two cups, set itself back down on the tray, and the two cups each floated out to greet them. Raising his cup to Margaret, Minkleton took a sip, patting his lips beneath his silver beard.

"Hot," he laughed.

"Now that we are settled in, we come at last to the reason for our meeting. I am here to entrust Farid Lee Thomas, as you no doubt have already guessed, into your care until such a time comes that he can be returned to where he rightfully belongs."

If she could have spoken, she might have asked what in the blazes this man was talking about; *where he rightfully belongs*. But of course her mouth was not working, and going dry from hanging open at the same time.

"Farid here is in need of a caretaker for a few years, and you seemed the best choice under the circumstances of his situation. I do not, however, have any clothes but what he is wearing as we speak, but I am sure you will be more than happy to see to that minor detail."

Pausing only long enough to change his voice drastically, to a frightening, serious business-like voice that anyone but a fool would not listen to the every word, he said, "I do however have these four books, which as you can see are quite blank." Sure enough, Minkleton pulled out a small silk purple bag, and took out four blank books. "All four of these books should be kept free of all hands until such a time comes and I correspond with you to return them to Farid." If Margaret thought that Minkleton's tone could not get any colder, she was wrong. "It would be wise to put them away, and put them out of your mind."

A very long and very uncomfortable silence fell, while Margaret tried to digest everything that was being said. Minkleton took the time to finish his cup of tea and set it back down on the tray. He simply sat there, completely at ease, humming away to some tune that she was unfamiliar with, and tapping his finger on the arm of the chair.

Only when the sound of the clock chimed nine did Minkleton stop his humming. With one more snap of his fingers,

the tray with the tea pot and tea cup sitting on top disappeared into a thin tendril of smoke, as did the cup of tea that sat untouched in Margaret's hand.

Without any warning, Minkleton rose from his chair and bent down one last time to look at the baby lying asleep on the couch.

"Goodbye, Farid. Until we meet again..."

Turning to the completely speechless Margaret Magwitch, Minkleton bowed his head and made his way for the door. "Until the time comes, Mrs. Magwitch, I dare say this is goodbye." With that, Minkleton left, shutting the door behind him.

As if the spell that had been cast over Margaret had suddenly lifted, she bounded to the door only to find that when she ripped it open, the man with the long silvery hair and beard was no where to be seen. When she turned back into the house, she couldn't take her eyes off of the baby...

"At least he seems normal..." she said to herself, only half convinced.

That evening Margaret found herself lying awake well into the late hours of the night. That accursed smile and most strangely friendly voice of Alvin Castor Bebel Minkleton was still so fresh in her mind. Everything he had said to her replayed inside her head like a broken record.

Not a sound stirred in the entire house. All the children were already in bed. Midnight came to pass, and Margaret found herself lying awake, wondering whether or not Farid was asleep in the room next to hers. One o'clock came around, and she was glad that tomorrow was Saturday just for the sake of having an extra thirty minutes of sleep. Two o'clock chimed on her clock, and suddenly the racket of a car alarm outside shot her upright.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

There was somebody now banging on her front door like a maniac. "What in the..." she didn't even get to finish cursing before four children came through her bedroom door.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"What's going on, mum?" the youngest girl cried, tears running steadily down her face. No matter how often she told the girl that she was not her mother, itsy bitsy little Katie still called her mum. She was only four, after all.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"Wait here," Margaret told the children as she threw her night robes over her shoulders. "Don't come downstairs. I will come back up here when I figure out what is going on." Four heads all nodded together.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Creeping down the stairs, Margaret could hardly keep her knees from buckling. Whoever was making that racket on the other side of the door was becoming more and more relentless. And still no one had turned off that accursed car alarm!

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Maybe those murderers next door...she started to think, but refused to let her mind wander like that. But what if they killed someone, and now someone is hurt? She couldn't help herself as she inched closer to the door. The memory of her new neighbors' conversation about murder was only too vivid. What if they are here to kill me?

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Unbolting the front door, Margaret took a deep breath and let it turn inwards. "What in the blazes do you think you are doing? It's two o'clock in the morning and I have four...five children!" she roared before she could stop herself.

Standing underneath the spotlight outside were none other than her two new strange looking neighbors. Ravil was dressed in purple night robes that had golden moons and stars embroidered all over, and Finn wore fiery red robes with a nightcap on top of his head. Both had looks of absolute horror on their faces.

Before Margaret could so much as howl again, the two men broke out into verse explanation, but not before they commented on her attire.

"Will you look at that." It was not a question.

"I knew it; these people wear their robes at night!"

"Well, I am quite glad we chose to put on our own night robes."

"Quite. Don't want to look strange to these people..."

Then, as if the reason for this madness was suddenly remembered, the man in the fiery red night cap, named Finn, said, "We are sorry to bother you, Madam."

"But you see, Finn and I are in a spot of terrible trouble." Ravil's voice was pure panic stricken, and both of their hands and knees were trembling. "We were hoping you could help us,

Madam, seeing as how you were delightful enough to come and welcome us into your neighborhood.”

“What are you talking about,” Margaret managed to squeak, terrified for her life and the children’s.

“Trouble, Madam. Like Ravil said.”

“We were out trying to start a fire the way you people do in our yard to boil some water for a pot of tea...”

“With these fire-starter sticks that we bought from a shop...”

“Yes, your shops are most strange to us.”

“Yes, yes, I agree, Ravil, most strange indeed.”

Finn handed over the long stick they he had apparently used to try and start the fire to Margaret, who took it absentmindedly.

“Well that stick sort of...” Finn started to say, but stopped as if unsure how to put it. But he need not worry, for Ravil picked up right where Finn left off...

“Took off.”

“Exploded is more like it, Ravil.”

The jumping back and forth between the two men was driving Margaret absolutely crazy! She would have yelled at the top of her lungs and awoken everyone on the street just to tell these two to shut up, but she had no voice. Not a voice that seemed to work at the moment anyway.

“Yes, like Finn said, exploded. That stick just exploded.”

“Then...well...as...you...can...see...” Finn said very slowly, and they both turned towards the car that was beeping loudly with its light flashing.

“Then something shot out of the end.”

“Yes, and it hit that round silver object across the street.”

“That one, the one on rubber wheels,” Ravil said, pointing at the car flashing, as if she needed to be told.

“It started making all kinds of funny noises.”

“It is still making all sorts of funny noises, Finn.” They both snickered. They were actually laughing, and Margaret had no patience for this nonsense! Not that she ever had any patience for nonsense.

“You people’s ways of getting around are most odd to us,” Finn said, not so much so to Margaret as to himself.

“Indeed they are. Good assessment, Finn.”

"Thank you, Ravil."

Glancing back at the car across the street, then at each other, and then at last at Margaret who had yet to say anything for some time, the two men in their completely bizarre clothing, paused for only a second. But when they realized that Margaret wasn't going to say anything, they went back to their explanation.

"So, Madam," Ravil started to say, but only for Finn to finish...

"What do you suggest we do?"

Absolutely red in the face and infuriated, with her hands and knees shaking with anger now, she had not noticed that these two...maniacs...had gone quiet again. Glancing down at the stick she had clenched in her hand for the very first time, she screamed as loud as her lungs would let her, more than likely waking up anybody within a mile radius on her tirade.

"You...complete...brainless...cow

brained....lunatics...that..." she had to pause and catch her breath. But then she screamed on, once again at the top of her lungs, though this time her voice was much hoarser. "Can you read, you idiots?" she asked, jabbing a finger across the stick, not expecting them to answer, but...

"Of course we can read, Madam," Finn said.

"Thank you very much. It reads..."

As if they had rehearsed this a hundred times before, they both read together "E.X.P.L.O.D.I.N.G. S.T.A.R.S."

"Exploding stars, Madam."

"How rude of her to insult us like that, Finn!"

"Very rude indeed, Ravil; I think that merits an apology."

"I agree. She doesn't seem to know us at all, though who could here? We are very educated, Madam, thank you very much." Somehow, though Margaret hadn't the slightest clue as to how, the man's voice sounded injured!

"We never should have volunteered for this."

"What is done is done, I'm afraid, Finn."

"Quite right you are, Ravil."

Turning back to Margaret, who they had completely ignored since her last outburst, the man in purple robes asked, "Anyway, can you help us, Madam?"

Like a teakettle on the brink of going off, Margaret Magwitch roared at the top of her lungs one last time. "Exploding

Stars are fireworks, you idiots! They shoot mini rockets! These are not matches!"

With that she slammed the door shut and staggered until her knees gave out and she fell like a pile of clothes onto the floor. She let out a small *hiccough*, and then burst into uncontrollable tears.

"Very rude, Finn," she could hear them saying outside her door.

"What a strange world."

"Strange indeed."

She could hear both of them as they walked down the brick walk to her driveway. The tears rolled down Margaret's face in a steady flow; her sleeves were quickly sodden from wiping her eyes. And for some reason she suddenly despised Farid Thomas, and it was only a few hours ago that he first arrived.

The clock chimed three as she sat on the floor sobbing. She had no strength in her to climb the stairs to her bed, or even to yell up to the children that everything was all right. It wasn't until she was so overly exhausted from crying, that she cried herself into a restless sleep.

It wouldn't be until the next morning when Margaret Magwitch looked into the mirror to see her tear stricken face that she saw the long strand of bleak silver mixed in with her newly colored cheeky red hair.

**FARID THOMAS
AND THE SECRETS OF TIME**

CHAPTER TWO: LIES, LIES, LIES

Nicholas Gracie

The inside of number 32 Rolan Avenue was very much the same as it ever was at the end of the cruelly hot month of July. Margaret Magwitch continued to maintain her pretense of being the world's most affectionate, thoughtful, care-giving, and well-to-do caretaker as the years passed by. There wasn't a person within ten miles who had not had to withstand and endure the most exhausting jives of just how wonderful all of the children that she looked after were. One would be forced to see the walls covered in pictures of Johnny's purple stained face after winning the first prize at the public high school's annual pie eating contest, or Katie, Mickey, and Courtney standing arm in arm underneath the Christmas tree from the previous year's holiday. But Margaret had a secret. She cared for a fifth child; a child which you would never hear her boast about in the least, who she didn't keep pictures of out in the open for visitors to see, and who she wasn't at all proud to say was hers.

Yes, of course Farid was still a child at Marge's Abode for Blessed Children, asleep in his clutter crammed tool shed that he was forced to call his bedroom. It didn't matter that there were three other bedrooms inside the house, aside from Margaret's. Two of which belonged to three of the children, and the third was used as a guest bedroom for the guests that never ever came to visit, and at the moment was packed full with toys and games.

Aside from having all sorts of garden tools, rakes, shovels, a couple of lawnmowers, and everything else that "had to be stored away inside the shed," Farid didn't mind sleeping on a tiny cot, stuck between two old broken bicycles and a vast assortment of different planting pots. As far as he was concerned, he was

considered an outcast in this unrelated family, and preferred to have his own room, even if it did happen to be smaller than the bathroom.

A ray of morning light shone down through one of the holes in the leaky ceiling, right into Farid's eyes, waking him from a deep sleep. The ancient looking alarm clock sitting on top of a broken milk crate, which probably had snakes, spiders, or rats sleeping inside, read half past eight in the morning. But seeing as how he wasn't even allowed to step foot inside of the house until after nine anyway, he found a pair of socks, some pants, and a clean shirt from the small drawer he kept all of his clothes in, got dressed, and went outside to pass the time. Seeing as how Big John was a big kid, his clothes were much too big for Farid to wear as hand-me-downs, and Margaret Magwitch didn't have a choice but to buy second rate clothes for him.

Grateful for the weekend, which was never really exciting to begin with, but it did mean that he wouldn't have to attend a torturous day at his summer schooling, Farid wished that it were still Saturday. But it wasn't. This meant Sunday morning cleaning—the worst part of the whole weekend. At least he got to cross out another day on his calendar; only two more weeks until his thirteenth birthday.

Farid Thomas was almost your traditional thirteen-year-old boy. His rather long, disheveled hair was never combed, he hated going to school, and he was growing five times too fast to get so much as a good part of a year out of any clothing; traditional, but not average.

When nine o'clock finally came and he was allowed inside the house, he had to wait for someone to come and unlock the door for him—which could sometimes take a while—then made his way to the kitchen table. Sitting there were four other children looking rather groggy, half asleep, and ungrateful to see him, awaiting their breakfast; his family. Katie was the only one who so much as acknowledged him with a quick nod. The rest didn't even look up.

He was rather used to this sort of behavior though, as was he to being given the most burnt pieces of toast, and charred bacon out of the lot that no one else would even touch.

Before anyone was finished with their breakfast, Madam Magpie—Madam Magpie was the children's nickname for

Margaret Magwitch—was giving out the dreaded tasks of Sunday morning cleaning.

"Katie, I want you and Courtney to go ahead and vacuum all the carpets, and dust everything in the living room. Johnny and Mickey, I want you two to do all of the dishes and clean up the kitchen. And please, make sure the plates are clean this time, last time they still had food caked on them and I had to do them all over again. You really need to learn, Johnny, you are certainly old enough."

All of the children grimaced about their tasks they had been assigned, but none would ever dare to so much as argue, for they all knew that their half-hour chores were nothing compared to what Madam Magpie was about to throw at Farid.

"Now, Farid," she said scornfully, "I want you to mow the lawn and pull out all of the weeds in the gardens." There were gardens all along the fences on both sides of the yard separating their yard from the neighbors', around the house, and up next to the driveway. "When you have finished with that, I want that pig pen shed of yours cleared out, and put back in proper order."

Faint snickers and giggles sounded among the other children followed Madam Magpie's instructions that she gave Farid. He was all too used to this kind of discrimination, and couldn't remember it having ever been any different.

"But that is going to take all afternoon!" he said before he could stop himself. "Not to mention that that is all of your things in that shed! Not mine!" *And most of it is broken or junk anyway*, he added, but only to himself.

Just as soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew that that could have been the worst thing to have said if he had any chance of lessening his amount of chores. Of course, the other children loved watching him protest, and getting Madam Magpie all fired up.

"Well, well," she said very slowly, and diabolically, as if she could taste every letter as it rolled off of her tongue, "the ungrateful little child thinks I am being too hard on him, does he?"

The last might have been more for the purpose of entertaining the other four children more so than it was directed at him. But then she quickly rounded on him, her face fiery red with indignation.

"I have taken care of you since you were just a baby," Madam Magpie went on, "and this is all the thanks that I get for my troubles? Or perhaps you don't like living here anymore? Maybe when the weather gets cold again, you would rather stay out in that shed with all those rodents than come back inside this loving home that you seem to want no part of?"

Every Sunday, Farid was faced with the same sort of threats. Getting up from his hardly touched plate, he shouted, "Fine!" waving his arms in the air, and storming out of the house.

Fluming with anger, he set to ripping out the weeds from the garden farthest away from the house as if he were ripping open the birthday present that he knew he wasn't going to be getting in two weeks. Not that he ever got much for his birthday; once Madam Magpie bought him a brand new rake, with a card that said: *Happy Birthday, now get to raking up the leaves.*

Between weeding out all of the gardens, and mowing the front and back yards, the entire morning was already spent. Farid was already dripping with sweat before he had even started tossing and pulling out any of the clutter inside the shed.

The three older children came outside later in the morning, after all of their chores were finished, just to let him know that they were all going to get an ice cream from the ice cream truck, courtesy of Madam Magpie, and then they were off to spend the afternoon at the park, which only irritated Farid even more. But it wasn't until Madam Magpie herself came out and sat down on a chair that really topped off his anger.

"No, no, you are doing it all wrong! I want that broken lawn mower over in the other corner," she ordered him after he was already bringing in the new and working push mower. "It can still be fixed...no use throwing it away." Though he knew all to well what the real reason she wanted to keep it was.

"But that is where my bed goes!"

Margaret Magwitch's face lit up behind a malicious grin. "Rubbish! You can find a new spot for your bed."

The hours following were the longest hours of the entire weekend as Farid was ordered to remove the clutter over and over again from the shed, and put it precisely where Madam Magpie wanted them.

When the entire shed had been completely reorganized—though it still looked like a giant jumble of clutter—and Madam

Magpie seemingly satisfied, Farid raced off down the street towards the park.

Knowing that he was only going to be ignored once he was there—though being ignored outweighed being Madam Magpie's guinea pig—he took his time getting to the park, taking a back path through the woods. He found a swing well away from Katie, Big John, and Mickey, so as to not look associated with them. In fact, from where he was sitting on his swing, they couldn't see him, and probably had no idea that he was even there, but he could hear every word that they were saying.

"Can you believe what Madam Magpie did this morning?" Farid heard Katie asking one of the others. "It isn't a secret, and we all know how much she hates Farid. But cutting the grass, weeding, and cleaning out the shed? I mean, c'mon! I almost feel bad for him." He heard the others laughing.

Why exactly Margaret the Magpie Magwitch hated him so much, he hadn't the faintest idea. He did, however, think that the rest of the children—except maybe Courtney, seeing as how she was only six years old—hated him simply because it earned them all special rewards like getting a free ice cream. Rewards that he was never given. But they all claimed that strange things were always happening when they were around Farid, which was also part of the reason that he chose to sleep in the shed; he couldn't deny that accusation.

Suddenly, Big John spoke up after a long silence. "Maybe Farid does deserve it, or maybe he doesn't, but that still doesn't change the fact that he is completely strange! I don't care how Madam Magpie treats him; I don't feel at all in the least bit sorry for him. Just let her keep him out of our hair."

If ever there had been a time when hearing people talking about him in that fashion bothered Farid, he couldn't remember.

For as far back as he could remember, he had never had any real friends, and every time somebody came to Marge's Abode for Blessed Children who showed even the slightest interest in adopting a child, Madam Magpie wasted no time in making Farid seem like a problem child who needs years of reforming, so as to take their eyes away from him. Why she didn't want anyone to adopt him when she so clearly loathed him was a complete mystery.

"Just because you're Madam Magpie's favorite, Katie," Mickey was saying in his high pitched, squeaky teenage voice, "you shouldn't feel bad for him. There isn't anyone as strange as him...except maybe those two neighbors next door! Though I'm not sure if anyone could be as strange as those two if they tried."

According to Madam Magpie, that was the absolute truth. Ravil and Finn were the two most abnormally strange people to have ever set foot on Rolan Avenue. However, ironically, everyone else that knew the two men of 30 Rolan Avenue seemed to love them. They often hosted dinner parties with some of the oddest assortment of foods, and were always asking how to cook this and that—even if it were store bought, or from a cardboard box.

Unfortunately though, the utterly perfect Margaret Magwitch had brainwashed the other children not to put up with any such nonsense, and that anything strange or even slightly mysterious should not be tolerated. But for some reason, it was only when Farid was in Ravil and Finn's company that he actually felt some sense of belonging. It was as if they were the only two people in the world that actually understood him.

"But still..." Katie started to say, but Farid wasn't able to catch the rest as all of a sudden three great big, bulky, pimply faced, boys clambered up over the fence, and spotted him, sitting alone on the swing. The Rat Pack Gang, as they called themselves. They were the biggest and dirtiest bullies at Farid's school, and they loved more than anything else to pick on Farid, and if they got the chance, to beat up on him as well. Broken bones and bruises weren't exactly uncommon with the Rat Pack Gang—though Farid had never suffered more than a scratch—but they preferred more embarrassing torments like dunking someone's head down the toilet.

As soon as Farid saw the gang coming towards him, he quickly got up and ran over to where Katie, Big John, and Mickey were all talking—well, they fell silent when they saw him approaching. But when the Rat Pack Gang turned the corner and saw the four of them standing there, they turned back around, and not because they were outnumbered, but because their leader, Francis, who was the biggest and had the most pimples on his face of them all, had a crush on Katie.

Once the gang was gone, Farid didn't bother waiting to explain why he had interrupted their conversation—not that it

wasn't obvious—but took off back down Rolan Avenue, without muttering any thanks.

It wasn't quite dark outside yet, but when Farid returned to Marge's Abode for Blessed Children, Madam Magpie was already busy mixing the different ingredients, stirring pots of potatoes, and shoving something into the oven, trying to get ready for dinner. She took no notice of Farid as he practically slammed the door closed and walked into the kitchen.

"Do you need help with anything?" he asked her, the words sounding strange coming from his mouth. He was trying to be careful to be nice so that maybe he would have a chance to watch a program tonight with everyone else. Why he bothered asking though, he didn't know, since he already knew the answer.

"What?" Madam Magpie asked Farid, startled at the proposal. It probably sounded just as strange to her as it did to him. "Oh, no...of course not."

In all of his years under Madam Magpie's care, anytime he offered to help with anything, no matter how big or how small it was, if he asked she immediately refused.

"There is no need for *you* to help with dinner, but if Katie is back, do please send her in."

Knowing, but not telling Madam Magpie that Katie was still at the park with the others, Farid muttered, "Okay," and walked away.

Before Farid had gone more than a few steps, there came a loud knock on the front door. It was a very hurried knock, like someone eager to get indoors during a rainstorm.

Grunting, Madam Magpie said to Farid, "Do be a good boy and open the door since you probably locked it coming in."

Madam Magpie's sudden request startled Farid even more than if she had told him that he could have actually helped with dinner, seeing as how he was never allowed to answer the door, or the phone—probably for the same reason that he was like a ghost in all of the pictures throughout the house. Whatever reason that might be.

"And if it is for me, see them to the parlor, and I will be with them in a moment. Oh, dear, I am a wreck..."

Laughing all the way to the door, Farid almost expected to find Big John or Mickey on the other side just waiting to trample him over. However, what he didn't expect to find was a tiny little

man, no more than three feet tall, with a bushy red beard, high heeled, black-buckled shoes, a green suit made from some foreign type of material with a matching bowler hat, and a pipe sticking out of his mouth.

“Op of th’ morni’ to ye,” the tiny little man said in a giddy, funny accent as Farid stared down at him. Farid couldn’t decide if his eyes were playing tricks on him or not, but this man looked like a leprechaun!

Suddenly the man broke out into a cheery little song before Farid could get a word in:

I come from somewhere far,
From a place where good folk are,
To assure things have yet gone wrong,
And bring a boy back to where he belongs.
So here I have written words for you,
And then just another line or two,
First of all, I am real,
The magic you see will break the seal.
Second and last, time will tell,
If the boy is well, I’ll ring a bell,
So here it is, a letter for crooks,
Time is of the essence, the secrets in the books.

“Ugh...” Farid couldn’t quite get the words out of his mouth. He was still trying to make sense of what the leprechaun had just said. “Right...” *So here I have written words for you*, he said again in his head. “Do you have a letter for me?” Farid asked, wondering if everything had just been a bit of nonsense, or if it had actually meant something more.

A grin broadened half the size of the leprechaun’s face. “Clever! Clever ye ar’! Good, good! I ‘ave’ ‘ere’ a letter fo’ a ‘ertain, Mrs. Margaret Magwitch,” the man said, pulling out a sealed letter that was almost the same length as his arm from the inside of his coat.

Farid took the letter, still shocked at seeing this tiny leprechaun outside his door. “Right...I will get this to the Mag...Margaret.” Surely his eyes and ears were playing tricks on him. After all, leprechauns are only made up folk...

Lifting his green bowler hat up off of his head, the tiny man said, "Good da' ta ye then," and hummed his way back down towards the street.

After glancing down at the letter for a second, when Farid looked back up again, the little man was gone. But instead, there was a giant rainbow arching from one end of the sky to the next that had not been there a moment before.

Returning to the kitchen, still unsure as to whether or not his mind had been imagining what he had just witnessed, Farid handed the letter to Madam Magpie who took it absentmindedly.

"Who is it from?" she asked without looking at him, setting the letter down off to the side while she took something out from the oven. "That couldn't have been the postman, it's Sunday."

With only a moment's hesitation, Farid murmured, "The neighbors," knowing all too well that Madam Magpie didn't put up with any sort of strange nonsense, and who would have only just accused him of being a liar anyway. "From across the street," he added quickly, knowing that she also cared nothing for the neighbors on either side of their home. "They said it somehow got mixed in with their own post, and apologized for not getting it over to you sooner." It was a flat out lie, but in Farid's mind, it seemed somewhat believable.

"Right," she said, sounding convinced.

Relief quickly washed over Farid as he moved towards the room to watch something on the television before dinner, thinking that the matter had been settled, and he was in the clear. Only, he never made it much past the dining table before the voice of Madam Magpie shrieked in his ears.

"No neighbor brought *this* letter!" she yelled, and Farid quickly turned around. Madam Magpie's face had lost every shade of its color, and had gone as pale as the floor tiles. She was staring down at the letter with her eyes wide and her expression blank—though not her voice. "Who brought this letter?" she whimpered. "I will not ask you again."

"A..." Farid faltered, not sure whether or not he should try another lie, or simply just tell her the truth; and cursing himself for not having looked at the name on the letter. "A...a leprechaun," he whispered, barely audible, almost frightened as to what Madam Magpie might do for making an accusation such as that. Only, what she did instead was very unlike her usual reaction when he

made mention of something she considered nonsense, which made it all that much more alarming.

"A leprechaun?" she doubted him, and was actually questioning him! Nor was she sending him off to bed without any dinner. "That is impossible." And she only sounded half convinced at that! "Please, Farid," she went on, her face still pale, "do tell me the truth. Leprechauns aren't real, and we both know that."

If she is being this nice, Farid thought to himself, maybe I can just tell her the truth after all, and not be punished for it. Or maybe he was really dreaming, and would soon wake up on his cot in his shed?

"I swear it's the truth, Margaret." He needed to at least use some small courtesies to sound a little more convincing. "It was a tiny little leprechaun, about three feet tall, dressed in all green—"but she cut him off.

"How dare you bring this wretched nonsense into my house, boy!" she roared. It was not a question, but it was like a switch had suddenly been flicked back to how it normally was. Her face had gone from no color at all, to a bright, fire engine red in a split second. "You know full well that I do not put up with such blasted nonsense! Now tell me the truth, Farid, who brought this bloody letter to the door?"

After all of her yelling, Madam Magpie had yet to even open the letter that she was ranting on about, but it instead lay crumbled inside her clenched fist that was now going white.

"It was a leprechaun, I swear it!" he yelled back, not caring what the outcome of it would be, seeing as how he was already going to be punished, if not scolded, for even mentioning anything as strange as a leprechaun.

He should have known right away that Madam Magpie had only been pretending to be nice, and that it had only been too good to be true.

"I will not be lied to, boy!" Boy is what she called Farid—and none of the other children—when she was too angry to use his real name. "I am only going to ask you one last time. Who brought this letter? And don't you try and lie to me by giving me any of that filthy nonsense you have concocted!"

"It *was* a leprechaun—"

"Get out of my sight, boy!" Madam Magpie was shaking from head to toe, and the pot of boiling water spilled all across the

floor as her waving arm hit the handle. "Go to your shed, and I don't want to see you again tonight! Do you hear me, boy? Now get out, now!"

It didn't make much difference whether Farid went back to his shed for the night, or back to the park, or anywhere else for that matter. No one was going to come looking for him to give his account of what had happened, nor would any of them have noticed if he did leave Rolan Avenue. Without anything to do, and nowhere to go, Farid did go back to his shed, still cursing himself for not having looked at the name on the letter, and lay down on his cot.

Maybe I can find the letter in the trash tomorrow, he thought to himself, but quickly passed off the idea as a bad one.

After a rather long night of endless dreams of short, funny looking folk dressed all in green like leprechauns, carrying around pots of gold, Farid's alarm clock went off, waking him for his dreadful, Monday morning summer class.

Farid had no intention of going into the house for breakfast, so he sped off early to catch the school bus at the end of Rolan Avenue, where he could try and remember what had happened in his dreams.

He remembered something rather exciting had happened in one, but all he could remember for sure was that at one point there had been an extremely old man looking at him, but *that* wasn't anything new. It had made him feel like a baby as the man looked down on him...*that* man turned up in his dreams often, but he couldn't remember having ever met him before.

Mr. Collins was a young and ambitious teacher. He was a tall, lanky looking fellow with a great big black mustache that buried his entire upper lip. And he treated Farid exactly the way that Madam Magpie would have wanted him to: cruelly, unfairly, and taking every opportunity to make him out to be the laughing stock of his fellow class-mates.

No matter what Mr. Collins did to Farid, Madam Magpie would always assure him that he probably deserved what he got. Luckily, he was rather used to this sort of attention at home, so it was rather hard for him to take it personally.

"Now tell me, Farid," spat Mr. Collins as Farid and only a small handful of other students whose parents felt they didn't learn enough the past year sat in his classroom, "how was your

weekend?" Mr. Collins never really cared about how Farid's anything was, and no matter what Farid told him, he always managed to turn it into something of a joke. "The class, as well as myself, would love to hear about it. Wouldn't we, class?" Farid's fellow students all murmured in agreement.

This was to be expected, seeing as how it happened most days, if not every Monday. Sometimes Farid could think up something that Mr. Collins couldn't find a way to turn against him, but this morning there seemed to be only one thing on his mind.

"Well," he said slowly, taking a deep breath as if to get ready for what was to come after, "a tiny little leprechaun came to my house yesterday afternoon to deliver a letter." It was only a second, maybe two, before the entire room was rolling on the floor, pointing their fingers at Farid, and laughing.

However, other than Farid who had expected exactly this reaction, the only person in the room not crying with laughter was Mr. Collins. Instead he had a dark glare in his eyes, and was scowling at Farid. It was some time before he actually spoke, and when he did, his reaction surprised even Farid—it was something Madam Magpie would have done.

"You are a liar, Thomas! You know just as well as I do that there is no such thing as little green men who run around fluttering gold all over the place, and calling themselves leprechauns!" This sort of behavior was usually reserved for impressing Madam Magpie at conferences—which it did. "I will see you after class in detention for lying," he said coldly.

"But I swear that it's true!" he snapped right back. This conversation sounded all too familiar, and it wasn't at all going any better than it had before. "A tiny little leprechaun gave me a letter to give to Mrs. Magwitch," he hated giving her the pleasure of using her name, even if she couldn't hear him. "You can't give me a detention for telling the truth!" By now all of the other children were back to laughing and enjoying themselves. Farid, on the other hand, was red in the face and didn't realize he was standing as he spat, "Sir," sourly.

"Are you prepared to tell me what I can and cannot do in my classroom?" The heated glare in Mr. Collin's eyes could have melted ice. "Sit back down, Mr. Thomas, or I will be forced to add another detention for your rudeness that you can serve out tomorrow."

Farid knew that behind those heated eyes, Mr. Collins was rather enjoying himself. It was always the same. He also knew what was about to come next...

"And you can expect that I will be making a phone call to your caretaker," Mr. Collins always took every opportunity to point out that Farid was an orphan, "to let her know that you will be walking home this afternoon instead of going home on the school bus."

"But, sir—" Farid started to say, but was stopped short.

"One more word out of you, Mr. Thomas, and I assure you that you will receive an extra detention on the sole basis of your rudeness!" Farid could see a slight curl in Mr. Collins' lips. He knew he had won. "Now if you don't mind, please sit back down, and let me continue with my job, which is of course, teaching you all the different genres of literature."

Farid stopped listening. He was too angry now to even concentrate long enough to try and remember what they had been talking about had he wanted to.

Why Mr. Collins can't just keep his mouth shut, he kept asking himself, over and over again. If only I had a tube of glue that I could stuff into his mouth. That would shut him up! Some really strong glue...

What happened next, Farid wouldn't have ever thought possible. It happened so fast that it was some time before even Mr. Collins himself noticed what was happening. For Mr. Collins' voice had suddenly become extremely muffled, which quickly turned into an obnoxious groaning sound, similar to that of someone who was trying to talk with more food in their mouth than they can chew.

When Mr. Collins turned back to the class, his mouth was completely adhered shut!

Panic spread over every line on their teacher's face, and the restless kids had suddenly gone curiously quiet, as if they too had been given a mouthful of glue. Farid, on the other hand, had to use all of his concentration just to keep from howling out in laughter.

Unfortunately, Mr. Collins' mouthful of glue only lasted a few short minutes—a few short minutes that Farid would have loved to be able to rewind and watch again and again—before he had back the ability to open and close his mouth.

There were a few seconds when everyone in the class, including Farid, didn't even dare to so much as breathe. Mr. Collins instantly put a hand up over his mouth as if to check and see if his mouth was still there.

After a short glance around the classroom, Mr. Collins settled his ice cold glare on Farid. All of a sudden, it wasn't quite so funny.

"Get out!" Mr. Collins yelled at the top of his lungs, waving one arm around in the air as if looking to bash a student in the head—Farid needed only one guess as to who that might be—and pointing at the door with the other. There was a moment when the whole class just looked at each other in disbelief, for they still had just over two hours left. "I...said...get...out!" he roared again, but very slowly, as if trying to puncture the sound of every word into each student's skull.

Every person in the room gave a start and then were quickly out of their seats, racing towards the door. "Not you, Mr. Thomas," said a threatening voice.

Farid stopped dead, and returned to the chair at the front of the class. Now all he could was sit and wait, and there was no sense in arguing.

"Yes, yes, you think you are so very clever, don't you? Well, you can't fool me, and I will see to it right away that Margaret hears all about today's events. Oh yes, Farid, I am going to have a nice little chat with her about your lack of respect." That didn't bother Farid nearly as much as what Mr. Collins sentenced him to next, though. "For the rest of the day, until five past one, you are going to spend the next couple of hours writing lines!" All of the busses left the school to bring the students home at exactly one o'clock.

If there was anything in the world that Farid hated more than all the hours of tedious yard work Madam Magpie made him do at home, it was doing the endless lines in detention that Mr. Collins made him do.

"What will you have me write, sir?" asked Farid curtly, taking out a piece of paper and a pencil from his pack.

"Don't give me that tone, Mr. Thomas! You will do as I say, when I say it, and I don't want to see that pencil stop writing until I say it is time for you to leave, and no sooner!"

"What if I need to sharpen my pencil?" asked Farid, knowing all too well that the question would get under Mr. Collins' skin. Maybe he was doing it on purpose...

Whipping around, Mr. Collins slammed both hands on the desk. "Then use a pen if you must, you insolent brat! Just start writing or it will be a full week's worth of detentions for you!"

Holding back from laughing, Farid met the glaring eyes of his teacher straight on. "But sir," he said carefully, knowing what it might lead to, "you still have not yet told me what you want me to write."

Indeed Mr. Collins could not hand out any extra detentions for the simple truth, though it would not have been surprising if he had found anything else to give for a reason. Everything from his eyes to his ears was flaring nevertheless.

"You are going to write..." Mr. Collins was clearly trying to come up with something that would be mind boggling, but instead decided on what seemed the obvious. "You are going to write that leprechauns don't exist, Mr. Thomas! Now start writing!"

Trying not to so much as glance up at the clock, as hard as that was not to do, or even up at Mr. Collins who sat at his desk staring down at him unblinkingly, Farid scribbled *Leprechauns don't exist* down page after page. Nor did he stop once to sharpen his pencil, or even to rest his hand. He just tried to think about keeping the tip of his pencil sharp, and it somehow never dulled. Farid wasn't going to give Mr. Collins, or Madam Magwitch, the satisfaction of seeing him even remotely sorry. Sorry for telling the truth at that!

However, that night, as was to be expected, Madam Magpie said to Farid, "Mr. Collins was perfectly in order by giving you lines for talking such nonsense! You deserved every last word you wrote!" That didn't bother him much; he just retreated to his shed and laughed in spite of himself.

If Madam Magpie was ever going to marry someone, he thought indignantly to himself, I bet Mr. Collins would be the unlucky chap, as scary as that thought was just to think about.

Farid didn't bother going inside the house for dinner that night, despite having his stomach growling and cramping from lack of food. He didn't want to have to deal with the snooty stares from everyone, and having to explain himself to the rest of the

house-hold just so they could make some sort of joke out of the whole thing, and tell him that he was a big fat liar.

But what he didn't expect to happen that night was to hear a sharp pecking noise coming from the other side of the door. It didn't sound anything like a knock, but rather something that was sharp and pointy tapping on the door; one of the other children trying to scare him with a knife maybe?

For a minute, maybe two, Farid lay there on his cot, trying to ignore the sound, hoping that it would go away so he could continue reading his book. Only the longer he waited, the more annoying the pecking sound became.

It didn't stop until he finally opened the door and found a tiny little pigeon and a great big owl fluttering about outside the door. The hand-sized pigeon had a letter sticking out of its beak, and the woody colored owl had a rather large basket weighing it down, clutched between its talons.

Farid quickly snatched the letter from the sharp beak of the pigeon, and carefully relieved the giant owl of the basket. Both birds immediately flew off into the sky and Farid found his curiosity aroused.

The basket contained a whole slew of different foods, including chocolates, pastries, cookies, and a mixture of all sorts of other foods that were just as tasteful. With his stomach feeling as if it were being twisted in every direction, he started shoving his mouth full with a little of everything.

After his belly felt bloated, and he thought he was going to be sick, Farid remembered the letter that he had somehow forgot about while satisfying his hunger, and turned it over to look at the mailing address. But all it said was: Mrs. Margaret Magwitch, and there was no return address, or name. Had there been one before, or had Madam Magpie just recognized this funny looking handwriting?

Quietly making his way to the living room where Madam Magpie sat knitting together sweaters for all of the children, Farid tried to guess what she would say when he told her. Nothing pleasant came to mind.

"Ugh...excuse me, Mrs. Magwitch," he said rather softly, waiting for her to turn around.

"So you have come inside for your dinner, have you?" she said scornfully. "Well there is some food left over in the

refrigerator that you can have, just clean up your mess when you have satisfied yourself.”

Taking a deep breath as if to steady himself, Farid said, “No, ma’am, it’s just that...well...another letter has come for you.”

“Oh? Is that right? Well, give it here then, Farid.” She was already eyeing the letter in his hand as he regretfully handed it over. Her face went pale once again at the first sight of the handwriting. “W-w-who brought t-t-this l-l-letter t-t-this time?” she stuttered, as if the letter itself was going to jump up and bite her lip. Her voice almost sounded terrified.

“A pigeon,” he told her, avoiding trying to get around the truth.

Madam Magpie’s eyes went up into her hairline, and her face turned scarlet red. “Pigeons don’t deliver letters, boy! Who really brought this letter, this time? Not the neighbors!”

“I just told you, it was a pigeon! I swear to you that I’m not lying!”

“*You are a liar!* Go back to your shed, and no dinner for you!”

Farid did as he was told, and went back to the shed. Thankfully, for the sake of his stomach that had started growling again, he had all sorts of treats to choose from to keep his hunger at bay. Though the question of who had sent the basket of treats, as well as the letter, was troubling him.

The next day at school, Farid received yet another detention for telling Mr. Collins that a pigeon had brought another letter that was addressed to Madam Magpie the night before. He had to write *Pigeons don’t deliver post* for four hours as a punishment. He chose not to mention the owl, which was probably for the better.

Over the course of the next couple of weeks, all sorts of strange things started to happen around 32 Rolan Avenue. Farid found a letter that was addressed to Madam Magpie with the same kind of handwriting sitting inside of a bird’s nest. And then another letter had been in the tiny little mouth of a groundhog that poked its head up out of the ground one morning as Farid was walking to where the school bus picked him up. The little creature had woven in and out of Farid’s legs as he walked, just like a cat,

until he took the letter, and then it disappeared back into its burrow.

Every time a letter suddenly appeared, he was tempted to open it, just to see what was actually written on the inside, or to even find a name, but decided better of it, for the very thought of the consequences that would follow was enough to make him cringe.

On top of all the unexplainable, strange occurrences, Farid had detentions for a good part of the two weeks. Mr. Collins did not want to hear about pigeons, or groundhogs, or the one night when the tiny scroll that runs across the bottom of the evening newscast had mysteriously changed into that foreign handwriting that was written across the letters. Madam Magpie had turned off the television, though, before anyone could read any of it.

Farid also never had a short supply of snacks. Every couple days or so, the woody owl, or another owl—sometimes white as snow, or black as charcoal—would bring him a basket. Still though, there never was a name...

“This is completely absurd!” Mr. Collins roared after the third detention, and started making Farid write lines that said: *I will not tell lies*, for four hours every day.

Nevertheless, the strangest of all the occurrences happened on the very night of Farid’s thirteenth birthday, which passed by unnoticed by everyone in the household. He was sitting at the dining table with everyone else for dinner, when out of the thin air, a wisp of smoke appeared, and two letters were suddenly sitting on the table. One was addressed to *Mrs. Margaret Magwitch* and the other to *Mr. Farid Lee Thomas*.

“Get out!” Madam Magpie bellowed, and to not only Farid, but to Katie, Big John, Mickey, and Courtney as well.

Luckily for Farid though, he was able to rip open his own letter and read it before she could take it away. It was written in the same kind of foreign handwriting as the name on the front, which made it difficult to read:

Dear Farid,

Please ask your caretaker, Mrs.
Margaret Magwitch, to give back to you the four

books that I entrusted into her care twelve years ago. They are your rightful ownership, and it is due time that they be returned to you. On another note, I am most anxious to see how you have grown these past twelve years, and will be most delighted when arrives our next meeting.

Yours Sincerely,
Alvin Minkleton

PS. Enclosed are directions.

"Well," he said, rather angrily, handing Madam Magpie the letter to read for herself. "What books could this man possibly be talking about? What are you supposed to give me?"

There were a hundred questions that he suddenly wanted to ask her, but she said nothing, and her face went paler than Farid had ever seen it go. She almost looked like a ghost. Instead she dropped her own letter and went upstairs. The letter that was addressed to her simply read: *Remember what we spoke of twelve years ago?* And the same man, Alvin Minkleton, signed the bottom of her letter as well.

It was not long before Madam Magpie returned, holding a faded, dust covered, purple silk bag. She shoved the bag into Farid's hands forcibly, and said ever so quietly, and not at all angry, "Go back to your shed, if you please, Farid. You can come in for breakfast if you would like tomorrow."

Not sure whether he was astonished more at the revelation of Madam Magpie actually giving him something, or at the fact that she had invited him in for breakfast, Farid went back to his shed.

Farid sat until long into the night on his cot staring at the purple silk bag, too terrified to open it, and re-reading the note that this Alvin Minkleton fellow had written to him. He couldn't ever remember hearing that name before, though twelve years is a long time...

ONE CHANCE

Brandon Mackay

One task, one hit, one pitch, one run,
one victory,
I'm going for it.

This script, this insight, this expression of self,
this last chance,
I'm going for it.

These feelings, these emotions, these best days,
these few shots at love,
I'm going for it.

What's right and wrong? What's good and bad?
What's smart and stupid?
I'm going for it.

One life, this life, these people, what else to think about?
Go for it.

THIS IS ME

Brandon Mackay

I'm from a place I enjoy calling home,
A place where I have respectively grown.
Bubbahead, Bmac, and now just Mackay,
From the beginning to where I am today.
In the yard, Power Rangers ran about for years,
Same yard, now it's a bonfire and beers.

I'm from a place I am my own,
Never afraid to go at it alone.
Sweatpants and shirts, that's what I was about,
Now it's jeans and a polo, so fresh, no doubt.
Toys transformed into drumsticks, bikes into cars,
Bedtime went from sundown, to outlasting the stars.

I'm from a place I never regret,
A place I hope I'll never forget.
I may change, and the people may too,
But I will never be ashamed to come back to you.

THE WALL OF ROCK

Brandon Mackay

It's more than a feeling when the sound fills the air,
Sweet emotions take me away.
Whether it is good times or bad times it doesn't matter to me,
Being eight miles high on happiness.
The crazy train of sound comes roaring in,
Liberates everything inside you.

Come to a closure, embrace it,
The stairway to heaven welcomes you.
Hush and take it all in,
Life will still be there in the end.

Make damn sure to never change,
Keep this crazy bitch going.
Take me back to those days,
And remember, it's more than a feeling.

ROOTS

Andrew Mello

The cobble stone path was becoming looser the farther he walked. Life was springing up in between the cracks of the man cut stones. If anything this proved that without humans, nature would flourish. It became clearer and clearer the more he walked how nature wanted to take control again.

"Can anyone tell me what two creatures give nothing back to the earth?" Mr. Johnson talked to a blank crowd sitting in symmetrical rows of desk chairs. High schoolers at 8AM weren't very receptive, in fact generally he felt like he was talking to no one. At least he would get a paycheck at the end of the week.

One unsure student raised her hand "How about... bugs?"

"Nice guess Judy, but bugs, even though they may be gross, actually help nature more than you think. If it weren't for them the decomposition of plants and dead animals would be a lot slower. Also, bees help make crops more fertile by cross pollinating. The many critters we step on without a second thought are food for upper level carnivores. While bugs may seem annoying, they serve a definite purpose in this world."

Judy didn't look shocked or moved by any means. She went back to staring at whatever nothingness that interested her so much before.

The cobble stone path was becoming so broken and erratic that nature was soon the only surface he was walking on. Upon looking up he could barely see any sunlit sky due to the abundance of over hanging trees. He was climbing over tree roots and knee high grass until he came to a clearing. There before him was the largest tree he had ever seen. Looking up, he noticed that this was the primary reason for the sun being nonexistent; this tree blocked out the sun like an eclipse, creating an eerie darkness all around him. At the base of this wide tree he

could see a tall opening. As he approached it he noticed it was full of bugs rotting out a path leading deep into the ground.

“Anyone else?” Mr. Johnson looked around at the blank students. With a sufficient amount of silence he knew it was time to reveal the answer. “The two creatures who only take from the earth and give nothing back are... wild boars and human beings. Both these creatures serve no environmental purpose, they only destroy.”

“But I can plant a tree... Isn’t that helping the environment?” Said a student sitting in the front row.

“Well yes, that would help but it still doesn’t outweigh the fact we as a species cut down miles and miles of forest every day to build homes, make pencils, and the very paper you’re writing on. While humans have the benefit of free will, the damage we cause far outweighs our good intentions.”

He was afraid of bugs his whole life, but for some reason he stepped forward into the maggoty recesses of the hollowed out tree. It was dark and he could feel the rotted walls moving. Bugs the size of his hands clamped onto his shoulders as centipedes crawled up the leg of his pants. He was squirming trying to make it through this hollowed out path. He could see a pulsating light at the end. Step by step he was getting closer and closer.

Finally he reached the end of the tunnel. Shrouded in light were a boar and a man hugging each other. They were floating like dust suspended on a beam of light. Right beneath their feet was a sword with a handle made of what looked like twisted tree roots. He picked it up and saw that on both the back of the man and boar there was an X. It made perfect sense in his brain... he took the sword and put the tip on the back of the humans back. Suddenly the man transformed into a woman and was screaming “NO, YOU'RE ONE OF US, DON'T DO IT!!” It was too late, he thrust the sword right through the Xs of both the boar and human. The sword slid in easily like a knife cutting lukewarm butter. A mixture of yelling and squealing filled his ears as both creatures fell limp and dead on the floor. Immediately the opening through which he came into the room began to swell like a 10 minute old wound. The room began to swell tighter and tighter until the boar, the human, and the bugs

were becoming like a bloody black mush. It was getting tighter and tighter; as he breathed, the mush was entering nostrils. He was squirming, fighting for air in this enclosing space. He let out a yell as he was about to be turned into mush himself...

“AHHHHHHHHHH!!!!” Jake awoke in the back of the class.

THE MACHINE

Jeff Landry

I had to start the machine briefly
So I could get my work done
Mother was in the next room talking in her sleep
While all the songs I had heard yesterday
Were blaring through my head

I'm up before my alarm
All of this is so annoying

The air is warm and dry and I can barely breathe
Every winter some part of my face cracks
It stays like that all winter
At least I have a cat this year
I named him after a famous baseball player
He's always watching me do something
That way I've always got company

Every morning is the same, but I get up anyway
Part of me wants to go back to sleep
I shake it off and instead have some cereal
I try not to think about all the things I have to do today
Before I can go back to bed
Tomorrow is Saturday so at least I get to sleep in

I'll finish running the machine tomorrow when everybody's awake
Maybe tomorrow I can get something done

MONKEYS

Jeff Landry

There was a banana truck and there were monkeys. The monkeys decided to eat all the bananas. When they were full, they tipped over the banana truck. Then they decided to eat the truck. It was metal so their teeth fell out. Then they ate their teeth. They were cannibal monkeys so then they ate each other. When there was one fat monkey left, he decided to eat himself. It was good. There, that takes care of all those pesky monkeys.

MACHU-PICCHU

Jeff Landry

Devoid of religion
My mind and body at ease
My spirit is fulfilled
I have no selfish needs

There is a desire to build
I must build something
Something for my spirit
A pyramid or resting place for my spirit to channel itself
Find my favorite stars and think of my favorite people

I need things
Clothing - material objects
So I should start a business
But I have no credit
I cannot start a business

What should I do?
I need a family and I need happiness;
But I cannot build anything.

IN ITS WAKE (PART I)

Jeff Landry

One door opens and another closes.
Things mislead and no one guides you.
Time no longer has meaning.
I lay down and toss and turn;
 asleep with my eyes open.
The world spins around while I stay still,
 waiting for something to happen.

The sun still turns.
People come and go,
 strangers all around me.
Confusion turns me,
Prophecy guides me.
There's nothing left for me to call home.
 I left it back about a thousand miles ago.
My heart upon the hearth to burn throughout eternity
 and when there's nothing left of me, I'll take these ashes to the
grave.

So brother can you do me this one small favor and write my name
upon a stone and place it by my weary bones so I can take it with
me where I go, should I forsake my soul for silver or for gold.

Any man more sane than I should clearly answer "no" for in this
guilded book I hold will have your answer deep inside and would
surely make for better company than an old forgotten stone.

So here within reflecting deep I see that God was strong but I was
weak.

All along the answer that I sought,
I found my strength was wrought from a hollow pit within.

Not my design, but helpless as I,
We watch them try to turn the tide.
Nothing can be done, but we refuse to die.

Just a path in front of me, disappearing from behind.

THE PATH (PART II)

Jeff Landry

So dizzy my head spins.
Beauty and ego spinning beside each other.
Wasted within it,
There's so much for me here but time closes off another day within
itself;
To be reborn as Yesterday.
So I sit and trace my eyes along the diamond-cut coil engraved
within the glass of beer I hold within my aging hands; looking for
the path I once was on - winding on forever so it seemed back then
- but now it simply vanishes; and every time I turn to find where I
had left off last, the path disappears again leaving the past behind
me, with nothing to see from here.

But still my mind tries to take advantage of what I once had -
daydreams, memories, scents and music and atmosphere, pushing
me throughout the days; leaving a trail of memories behind me,
hoping some will see me through from here.

BATTLE OF THE GODS

Jonathan Shipman

Long ago in an age past, cries of war and pain called out into the vastness of space, and echoed into the usually silent heavens. Death and destruction cut like a scythe over the now violated world of Anadar. Great cities, entire regions of the world lay in ruins, gasping for the air they would not receive. Far and wide, in so many places, in so many people, only desolation exists where glory once did.

Gothma, The Betrayer, Beginner of All Darkness, Architect of Destruction, The Extinguisher of Life, Exalter of Himself, Bane of The Heavens, Murderer of God and Tormentor of His Followers, Fountain of Shadow, Consumer of Light, Herald of Hatred, Minstrel of Madness, Avatar of Anguish, Progenitor of Terror, Master of The Undone, Bringer of Hell, Inspirer of Greed, Former Divinity, Composer of The Ballads of Selfishness, Inventor of Lies and Deceit, Self Proclaimed Successor of Narthaniel and Predecessor of None, Smotherer of Faith, Sunderer of Hope, Rapist of Love. It is because of his sins that Anadar has been reduced to an unworthy description of nothing.

Jairus looked upon the chaos the being once known as Norlantir had wrought. The Ashen landscape blew and burned his eyes, but despite the filth of the air, Jairus, and the light that he was, remained untarnished. This was it, the final push to end his brother's madness, Jairus and his forces had pushed Gothma and his armies back to Gothma's ancestral home on the top of Mount Daolith. When had the war started? Jairus, a member of the divine, and helper in the creator of the world, not even he could remember.

Jairus looked toward a sky that consisted of nothing but ashen clouds and crimson lightning and whispered to himself, "Brother, what have you done?" Jairus knew that the coming confrontation would be harder than any war he had waged so far, for this battle would not only be fought outside of him, but would

threaten to tear his soul as well, or what he felt was left of it. Making his way toward his brother's keep, he stumbled in sadness. Despair and a burdened heart shackled his feet to the lifeless earth. None would stop him he knew, though he wished someone could.

Pity overtook him once again, as his armies of innocents clashed with Gothma's hordes of hatred and god induced wrath. Sorrow and horror filled Jairus' heart as he gazed upon the unholy barricades Gothma's forces had built for themselves, makeshift walls built from the corpses of the fallen, bloated bodies with eyes and mouths sown shut, once slaves, forced propel Gothma's war machine in silence and darkness for the rest of their short, less than lives.

Motivated by his brother's atrocities, Jairus rose from his despair induced stupor, and entered Xlanelhal, Gothma's fortress. The gold and silver light of Jairus' presence cast aside the darkness that flooded the halls. Wrath and righteous anger filled Jairus as he proceeded to cut down Gothma's elite guard and various demonic sovereigns, the holy fire of his blade consuming them before it even touched their flesh. Jairus rounded his way up a towering stair case as he gave the last guard a fierce punch that removed the sovereign's lower jaw from his skull, his head bloodying the wall behind, the last of Gothma's body guard lay still.

Vindication was near, Jairus knew, as he ascended the staircase that would take him to the top of Xalenthal's tallest spire. Every step was agony as it brought him in closer vicinity to his brother's evil, each step adding another link to the chain that seemed to hold him back. But he was determined, and no chains and no tears or hesitation could stop him from doing what he didn't want to do, but had to do, and knew was necessary. As Jairus stepped up that final step, he caught sight of the one responsible for all that made a once perfect world, a regrettable place to live. He could feel his brother's dark power radiating toward him. Jairus fought to keep it from his heart. To be in such close proximity with darkness pained him, and he began to understand what evils greatest strength is. But Jairus resisted and he remained untainted. Gothma's robes and cloak blew wildly and uncontrollably in the wind, two tempos that suited him well. From the peak of his fortress, he hurled spells that devastated entire

battalions, his godlike powers laying waste to whatever he chose, be it elven, demonic, or human, all perished under the hellish fury of his might as flames leapt from his hands, eager to digest the living and unliving. A symphony of crimson lightning struck the earth as Gothma raised his fist toward the sky, twisted it, and pulled it downward toward his chest, as if conducting a nihilistic orchestra whose only purpose was to negate all that exists.

Jairus rose from the staircase and stood at the opposite end of the tower, and faced his once closest friend.

"Norlantir!" Jairus cried "Stop this madness at once! I give you one last chance to not let it end here!" Gothma stopped, and turned to face the one who had spoken to him. As Gothma's gaze met his brother's eyes, Jairus thought to himself: "His beauty still remains; his darkness has not yet tainted it? Even in his eyes there is hardly a look of hatred, only that I can perceive it and feel it, do I know that it is there. Were these circumstances removed we could still be brothers, for even now, on the surface, there is hardly a difference between us." Jairus composed himself and once again pleaded with his brother.

"Norlantir please! Lest all of Anadar be consumed by hatred and darkness, things you once despised." But there was no reaction in Gothma. Jairus' words fell on selectively deaf ears, and he knew it.

"Ya sabur zalhala bismalahir alhamdu rahim!" replied Gothma in the tongue of the gods. Jairus despaired and wept at his brother's words. He knew that violence would have to be his argument, magic and weapons his words and logic. Jairus drew his sword and steeled himself as he moved toward his brother.

Gothma drew his sword as well, and was prepared to destroy the pathetic and broken thing standing in his way. Their swords met, and holy fire flew from Jairus' blade, though not Gothma's. Despite its appearance it emanated a furious fire and darkness as black as the heart of its wielder. The armies below stopped their fighting immediately, knowing that their fate was no longer being decided between two battle lines, but hundreds of feet above them. Unsure of who to cheer on, for both combatants appeared the same from this distance, soldiers and minions from both sides cringed and shielded their eyes at each meeting of the swords above, for each blow and clash wrought a symphony of

holy and unholy fire that consumed and danced about the spire of Xalanehal, only then was it evident who was who.

Gothma extended an outstretched arm toward Jairus, disarming and sending him doubling backward with a blast of flame and dark magic. Jairus got to knees just in time to his brother's sword at his face.

"You are a fool Jairus, you should not have come. You should have fled; now you will suffer the same fate as the weak unmentionables you tried so hard to save." Power radiated around Gothma as his voice rose "You have failed Jairus, as we both knew you would! And what was that you said about it ending here? This is just the beginning, my brother!"

As Gothma lorded his victory over Jairus, a glimmer of hope, of redemption appeared. Gothma did not notice it, for he was still gazing down in tunneled and furious contempt on his brother, but the perpetual darkness that covered Gothma's realm began to split, and the reinforcements Jairus had counted had arrived. An army of Analahindriel, of angels, descended from the heavens, bringing light to the whole of Xalenhal and the plain that surrounded it.

Gothma filled with rage as he turned just in time to see an entire army's worth of javelins of light streak toward him, and impale his body. He roared in pain, and immediately began to regain his composure, for even the weapons of the Analahindriel could cause only surface damage to a Paraneth. But the attack had served its purpose, and Jairus, wasting not even a moment, rose to his feet and forced his brother over the edge of his own fortress.

Gothma wailed as his divine form fell towards the earth. His body crashed and spun against the jagged edges of his fortress, creating explosions of light and flame as it crushed battlements under it, and tore entire sections of Xalenhal asunder. Finally, Gothma's body plummeted into the moat of lava and darkness that surrounded his keep, sinking immediately, as if he had hit only water.

Silence fell over then entire field and no creature on either side made a move, all eyes were on the spot where the lord of all darkness had just fallen. Gazes intensified as a charred hand clawed its way onto the bank surrounding the moat. The Analahindriel were immediately upon Gothma and dragged him from the lava.

All who saw him were speechless. Gothma groaned in pain as he was pulled from the moat and roared as he saw his new visage in the shields of his enemies. Staring back at him was an indescribable horror. Where but a few moments ago there was a being whose beauty was rivaled by none, there was now a powerful but drawn frame covered by what appeared to be naught but a stretched and charred, layer of flesh, blackened by heat and flame. And upon this body, rested a face which was too horrible for even the stuff of nightmares, a blackened, bald, skeletal head, set with a mantle of darkness, and eyes of magma, covered with more tightly stretched, blackened and boiled flesh that seemed like it might split at any moment.

Gothma was beaten to the ground, and bound and chained. Gothma's degenerate face rose just in time to see Jairus standing above him. Jairus set what remained of his brother's cloak about Gothma, though it was now as black and ruined as its owner.

Jairus turned away, unable to look upon his deformed brother any longer. He walked off in isolation, and after putting a satisfactory distance between himself and everyone else, wept loud and uncontrollably, fully aware the end was far from near, and that his next decision would be even harder than what he had already done.

Jairus made his back towards Hazael, leader of the angelic army. The Ahalahindriel were now clearing out the remainder of Gothma's forces, and rounding up that which wasn't killed.
"Jairus, my lord, what is to be done of Gothma and his followers? How will we contain your brother and all his evil?"

"I do not know yet, Hazael." He replied, returning to his normally soft spoken manner.

"And what of Xalenhal, Lord?"

"Tear it down and scour its labyrinths of whatever filth remains there. We must miss nothing. As for my brother's fate..."

At these words, Gothma looked up toward Jairus; hate filled his fiery, obsidian eyes. But Jairus saw what the others, and not even Gothma saw, he saw a desire for mercy. "He will not be killed." A cry of surprise and contempt came from all who heard Jairus' words, and anger was in the eyes of many. Hazael spoke. "Not killed? After all he has done, he will roam free? You cannot be serious? My Lord, pardon me, but he must die!" With no rise of tone, and with no hint of anger, Jairus replied.

"Must he Hazael? Is that really the only option of judgment for Norlantier?"

"You mean Gothm—"

"I mean exactly what I said, Hazael. Norlantier shall not die for his deeds, but by no means will he go unpunished or roam free."

"He murdered Narthandiel! There is no higher offense!"

"And I do not believe Narthandiel would have wished death upon Norlantier. I have spoken with the one who witnessed the murder, and as life left Narthandiel there was no contempt in his eyes, but there was mercy, and there was love."

"You have spoken with The Witness? You have spoken with Isha—" started Hazael.

"Enough! Say no more my friend. Norlantier will be punished." There was a pause in the conversation as all eyes were on Jairus and Hazael.

"Permission to speak?"

"Of course, Hazael."

"If I could, I would slay your brother where he kneels, and I would parade his corpse across the whole of Anadar, as a testament to what happens to those who make the sort of choices he has!" There was another pause, and then Jairus answered patiently.

"You must watch your words, my friend; for at this moment you sound very much like the one you speak of. And if that would indeed be your choice, I am thankful then, that it is not yours to make, though I would be lying if I said I am glad it is mine." Hazael lowered his head in shame and embarrassment.

"Yes, Jairus. I apologize."

"And you are forgiven... Now organize our forces and send the wounded human, elven, and dwarven forces home. From this point on, only those who wish to accompany us among them will have to. All who wish to go home may do so. The Analahindriel can handle what remains of our enemies. Ready our ships as well and prepare a course for the island of Deris Celedon. Once your departure has been readied, I will go ahead of you to the island, and prepare for what is to come. Your voyage should take no more than a few weeks, and I will expect you there in that time."

"Yes my lord, it will be done.... And what of your brother?"

"He will remain here for the moment and then he will accompany me upon my return to Deris Celedon. Now go, and the troops and ships." Hazael left and began doing as Jairus asked. Jairus turned to Gothma, who was still kneeling in silence.

"Norlantier, you may rise if you wish."

"And when I wish, brother."

Jairus stepped back as Gothma spoke, his voice no longer possessed its divinely sweet resonance, no longer would his voice alone entice, even when his words were vulgar, for now it also reflected its owner. It was deep and thunderous, and bore a sound that reminded Jairus of the grinding of rock and steel, a voice that now caused pain in all who heard it. Gothma drew up to his full height, standing about one head taller than Jairus, his dark cloak draped about him, accentuating his already formidable height and physique. Though his beauty was ruined, he was no less frightening.

"Yes, when you wish brother." The shock had passed, and Jairus regained his patient composure. "Norlantier, you will accompany me to Deris Celedon."

"Of course I will." Answered Gothma in a falsely submissive tone. "Lead the way, brother."

After the weeks of preparation had been made, Jairus returned from the island to bring his brother to it. Jairus took Gothma and warped him, along with himself to an ancient ruin on Deris Celedon.

"Norlantier, you must know you are defeated, your attempt at conquest has failed, and your fate is in my hands."

"So it would seem, Jairus, but I am far from defeated. Others will continue what I have started; this world is scarred by my actions, and has been warped irrevocably. I have sown seeds that you shall never heal, and that I will never take away. My legacy will be more far-reaching than you realize, or perhaps you do realize it, and seek to deny it."

"I do not deny it. But I do not need to hear my ideas embellished as you do. You will not be here to witness my legacy, brother, nor will you be here to stymie my efforts to rebuild and restore Anadar."

"But you said you will not kill me? And I know you Jairus, you do not lie."

"You are correct in what you say, I shall not kill you, though I certainly could, and nearly all believe I should." Jairus gestured toward the ruin in front of them. It was a large and ornate platform, with a wide staircase leading up to a hollow arch way that looked out toward the ocean, and the setting sun. "This is the punishment I have devised for you: banishment."

"Oh? Where to?"

"To a point, that is for you to decide. I am sending you to a new realm, one that I think more accurately reflects your previous homeland and new persona. And one that will forever remind you, I hope, of your fall from Xalenhal. I am banishing you to a world of fire and chaos. All your followers will be banished there with you. And you may name it whatever you like and rule it however you wish."

As Jairus, finished what he was saying, the kings, queens, and leaders of each race, along with their escorts, and a legion of angels, emerged from the nearby forest. They brought what remained of Gothma's forces, chained and bound in the same manner he was, and marched them to the foot of the strange archway that Jairus had made.

As the sun set directly behind the center of the archway, its rays focused through. Jairus raised his arms toward the great building and proceeded to open a vast portal to another realm, the one he had just described to Gothma. It was a broken land with pieces of it crashing into other pieces, creating explosions of dark energy as they collided, resulting in more floating pieces of continent. Its sky was a perpetual storm of red lightning; its oceans were vast seas of fire, with shores of ash. Even from the other side of the portal, the realm's heat and darkness could be felt.

The Analahindriel began marching the last of Gothma's soldiers, servants and generals up the staircase and into the window-like vortex. Gothma's anger rose as each minion was banished forever. Finally, he was the last one, and it was his time to enter the great gateway. The Analahindriel dragged Gothma up the staircase. Hatred and contempt burned in his eyes, and flames leapt forth from his mouth as he spoke.

"You cannot banish me forever Jairus! This is my world, my world! I will not leave it in your hands Jairus, not forever! There shall be a reckoning in blood! I shall flay your skins and

souls for this! I swear to you Jairus, there will come a day when I shall be everything! There will come a day when you, and everything else in creation that says "I" shall say it only through me!" With these last words the fire coming forth from his mouth engulfed his entire body, forcing his captors to let go of him, and hurl him through the gateway. Gothma's screams of hatred and the wailing of his followers were all that could be heard as Jairus allowed the portal to shrink. As the portal sealed shut, silence filled the air. The sun set and it was night.

A LOVE STORY

Jonathan Shipman

Once, though not only once, there was a young man. This young man lived an ordinary life, with ordinary friends, and an ordinary family, if such things exist. This particular young man struggled with the same things we all do, and all of the things we don't. He wondered what it meant to live and what it meant to die, and if there is any dignity in either, and if it matters. He wondered if his friends liked him, if they pitied him, cared for him, and if they were his friends at all. Sure enough some of them were, and others were not. He went to school, he went home. And in between all of these things, he drifted, though he did not necessarily even know where. The young man wondered if there were others who drifted too, and of course there were.

One day, though not only once, the young man passed by a girl, and he wondered what it meant to Love. Love, that ideal of ideals, that thing, if it is a thing that we hold above all other things. The Love of an idea, an object, a belief, a place... a person. He wondered if people understood what Love is, or was, or will be, and if it was truly as everlasting as people seem to say. Since people don't live forever, how could they know? The young man wondered if love saves or condemns, or if it kills, or damns, or redeems. Perhaps it does all of these things, or maybe none of them at all. But wondering about Love is not enough, the answers will never come that way, when nothing but time is sacrificed in its pursuit. Though perhaps that is the only thing one loses even when it is honestly sought after.

So the young man, in time, though not too much time, though certainly more than he'd have liked, found someone he began to care for in particular, or at least someone he wanted for himself more than others. The young man found that Love, above all things, was painful. It hurt to Love. It hurt to watch other young men court and flirt with his beloved, worse than that, more deserving men, if there is such a thing. The young man was afraid

of losing the beloved, afraid that she would reject him for another. But how could she reject him as long as he remained silent? And how could Love, if it is indeed perfect, involve the imperfect, such as pain and jealousy? But what a horrible thing to admit that one does not Love at all, to be forced to admit that, rather than having a beloved, one simply has an object of their affections, or desires. He wondered why there must be an object at all, and why Love naturally seems to be focused on or at something, and why that something, if it is a person, tends to so quickly reject such a supposedly wondrous thing?

In time, though not too much time, though certainly more than the he'd have liked, the young man realized that none of his experiences as of yet had been Love at all. For is not Love free of fear? The young man observed as his feelings, though not his Love, began to change. The other young men who courted his beloved, for she was no longer the object of his affections, he no longer resented. Provided they were indeed good honest people. He was no longer afraid for her, but even more importantly, no longer afraid for himself. Having discovered this, the young man revealed his heart to the beloved. She did not respond in kind. She had no such Love in her heart for him.

The young man tried to explain himself, but could not. How could he express to her all that he had learned, when she had not even begun to understand what he now did? All he could do is utter various phrases and half-thoughts. He could not even use the words "I love you," for she would not understand what he meant by it. So, she walked away, and he stayed where he was, and wondered. He thought about the various clichés regarding Loving and losing. He wondered what he had lost; nothing it would seem, except time.

He remained friends with the beloved, and in time, indeed much time, though much more than he'd expected, the beloved began to understand the things he had come to. The beloved did more than fall in love now; she had learned to Love as well, though not him, not the young man. He had expected such things, and was not surprised by them, only overjoyed, overjoyed that a good friend had discovered what he had, that secret to human harmony, to life itself. He rejoiced for her, though never with her. Now there were no more shadows on her mind, only light, only Love.

The young man watched as he knew the moment for her to leave his life drew near. He saw it clearly. All stories must come to an end, the young man knew, except the ones that don't, perhaps none of them do. But in his heart of hearts, he bade the beloved farewell, feeling no sense of loss, for she had gained everything, and no sense of regret, because he had as well. The young man pondered the phrase "it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all," for now the saying no longer made sense. How could one have both? Love and loss do not coexist, they cannot. To Love is to gain everything, anything before is nothing, and one cannot lose nothing. The young man looked into the Sunrise (for it never seemed to set now), and to where the beloved would never be, with him.

HARD LAUGHTER

Eric Betten

I'm from colored glass and thick smoke
Missing guitar picks and lost lighters
I'm from "Hey kid, what's up" and a ringing phone
Followed by friendly faces and bloody eyes
I'm from flick, breathe, choke, and cough
And the roomful of hard laughter that follows
I'm from a sizzling grill with a big slab of meat
Wrapped in sauces, spices, bacon and topped with fried eggs
I'm from a black ovation named Esmeralda
Who sings, laughs, and cries for me when I can't
I'm from philosophy and paint sided with chopsticks and broken
English
And dad's spirit that I carry everywhere with me
I am from love, lust, and laughter
And still trying to find a healthy balance between them

As I wander on through this world
The list will keep going
And I will learn more

SLAP 'N POP

Eric Betten

Get up and jump
Slap pop slap pop
Big smiles
Do a back flip
Look her in the eyes
Give her a kiss

Put the light to the green
Close your eyes
And inhale deep
Smoke storms in my lungs
Still I manage
To get up and jump
Slap pop slap pop

Life is beautiful

NIGHT'S GLARE

Mark Thomas

The moon shall shine into the window of mine
The moon shall shine upon these eyes that never lie
The moon shall shine for crooks, cops, and vigilantes

The moon shall shine and pierce through darkness
of everlasting night as if gazing into
the pit of fire and brimstone

The moon shall shine on the pure
for it could be the knight's chivalry
to save you from the demons

The moon shall shine upon the one spot still untainted
but surrounded by darkness, in that
lies the devil himself Lucifer with the
derailment of temptation so we can lose our
humanity and get out of god's good grace

But we can taste the will that
becomes our trinity and deciding factor...

May it be life and love or death and sorrow?

Knock... knock... knock...
Do you think the night's glare is looking back to stare?

8 MONTHS OF DENIM

Elizabeth Heath

She sat in denim
The same denim jacket
The one he gave her
Made up of patches and holes
Frayed at the edges
She sat in denim for 8 months
Until the buttons wouldn't come together
And the holes got bigger
From being stretched around the new life
She carried
The new life she hoped had his glorious green eyes

Her thoughts went back
To the 1st day they met
“He's a friend of a friend
And you just have to meet him”
When she grazed over his body
And her breath caught when his eyes met with hers

She thought about the 4 years together
The birthdays, the Christmas parties
And the denim jacket
He draped over her shoulders
As he boarded the bus
To training camp
And his eyes still glimmering
In the foggy morning window
Her voice cracked with the last
“I love you”
And the whisper
“I'm pregnant” she couldn't bear to tell him

And the denim jacket
Still drapes her shoulders as her thoughts now wander
To the new life
She hopes has his eyes
And how the glorious green eyes
Of the new life
Will meet his when he steps off the plane
Holding the letter she wrote him
Telling him
It's going to be a boy.

SUBWAY MAPS

Elizabeth Heath

Point A

The apartment lines with cat hair
Swimming in a sea of drug deals
And an excess amount of carbon dioxide
Back in the wild days of
Blacking out letters on road signs
Over feeding the fish
And forgetting to turn off the hall lights
When the color of my hair was whatever color bus I took to get to
the drug store
On the cross city road trip
With cameos of the Marlboro Man
And Captain Morgan

Point B

The teacup waiting on the old wooden table
And the smell of cinnamon candles
The way I imagined a phoenix would smell
Where mother was always waiting
Wondering if I had gotten lost again
On those road trips I used to take
Stopping every now and then to enjoy
A smoke and a new chapter
Dancing with the imaginary friend in my back pocket
Laughing out
Where else could I go but home?

Point Blank

The subway maps were never the right shade of optimism
Always mocking where I couldn't go

I never had enough tokens to get back
And hitchhiking became a game for me
See who would let me smoke in the car
Who offered me 10 bucks to go down on them
Or who would offer me more to just

Listen

But no one ever let me rest my boots on the dash
So I'd just fish out my mix-tapes
Play them The Dresden Dolls
Fiona Apple

And sing along between drags
Until the kiss happens
When they realize the voice
Is mine
And I get the smell of an unanticipated erection
Which I never feel bad about
And they always ask to see my scars
But I would change the subject
Get out
And find another subway map
To get lost in

RUSTY SOUL

Elizabeth Heath

My darling soul mate and I
We go to bed with bourbon and wake up with whiskey
Half a shot and I'm out on the street
How did I get here?
My rusted soul in my pocket
Jabbing me in the thigh
And I need a new one
We both need new ones
But the ones at the thrift store are stretched out in all the wrong
places
The Internet was completely out and from Wisconsin anyway
And they won't ship
All the animal shelter had to offer were sad but beautiful eyes that
made too much noise
So lets go back to bed baby
Your soul is starting to fade
So you want the glasses or just the bedside bottle?
New souls can wait another day
They have for years now anyway...

SALUTATIONS

Colin Progen

I'm not sayin' - I'm just sayin' - I should've said fuck it;
merely sashayed by mausoleums on shoddy foundations.
Just uproot the lilies and chuck 'em in a bucket.

They sting the earth bright green like young bucks kick
salutations.

I'm not sayin' - I'm just sayin' - I should've said fuck it.

Warden can't explain the love that a thousand blossoms can commit
in collaboration.

Just uproot the lilies and chuck 'em in a bucket.

My opened eyes scrutinize minute parasites collectively punt
development to transmit
hallucinations.

I'm not sayin' - I'm just sayin' - I should've said fuck it.

Shivering pantless legs that dangle off the edge can't quit
temptations.

Just uproot the lilies and chuck 'em in a bucket;

for they are almost in bloom and so am I in soundless ruckus.

Engrave your zeal in this genteel relation.

I'm not sayin' - I'm just sayin' - I should've said fuck it.

Just uproot the lilies and chuck 'em in a bucket.





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